

COPING WITH A FURLOUGH

Thousands of workers are currently furloughed (placed on compulsory, unpaid leave) from their jobs for an indefinite length of time. The involuntary loss of your job for any period of time is a significant event and you may have any number of reactions to this loss.

IMMEDIATE REACTIONS

When people experience a distressing event, their bodies automatically respond in a way that allows them to protect themselves and deal with the situation. This fight-or-flight response involves an increase in heart rate, blood pressure, muscle tension, and breathing rate.

If you are directly affected by the announcement, common reactions you may have experienced immediately afterward include the following:

- **Anger**, confusion, pounding heart, trembling or shaking, fast breathing, sweating, and nausea.
- **Shock** or disbelief at what has happened.
- **Denial**, you can't accept that it has happened—so you behave as though it hasn't. Other people may think that you are being strong, or that you don't care about what has happened.

REACTIONS OVER TIME

People react differently and take different lengths of time to come to terms with what has happened. Even so, you may be surprised by the strength of the feelings you may have. Note that while many of these may be negative or unpleasant feelings, they are part of the normal reaction.

Some reactions that people experience include:

- Helplessness, feeling vulnerable and overwhelmed
- Avoidance of situations or thoughts that remind them of the furlough or their job.
- Sadness or feelings of loss or isolation.
- Sleep problems, including trouble getting to sleep, waking in the middle of the night, and dreams or nightmares.
- Worrying about what to do next.
- Anger or irritability at what has happened, at the senselessness of it all, or at what caused this to happen (often asking, "Why me?").
- Not everyone will experience all of these responses to furlough or will experience them to the same degree. There may also be other reactions to add to the list. However, in most cases over a period of days or weeks the negative feelings will subside.

WHAT CAN HELP?

The best approach, immediately after the announcement of the furlough, is to accept that you will be distressed: This is normal. At this stage, others can help greatly by letting you talk to them—if you want to—about the furlough and your feelings about it. Talking can help people to adjust. It helps them to make sense of what has happened, to feel less alone with their worries and to regain a sense of control. Sometimes, people find it easier to talk to people other than their families.

LOOKING AFTER YOURSELF

- Try to get into a healthy, daily routine as soon as possible. You may need to gradually introduce yourself to your new routine.
- Do things that are relaxing and enjoyable.
- Talk to friends who are supportive and understand what you are going through. It can help to spend time with others who have been through the same experience as you.
- Take some time for yourself. At times you may want to be alone or just with those who are close to you. Take things at a pace that is comfortable to you.
- Work on your stress levels by ensuring that you have adequate sleep, a nutritious diet, and regular exercise.
- If you cannot sleep, do not lie in bed tossing and turning—get up and do something relaxing until you feel tired.
- Don't take on too much. Being active can take your mind off of what has happened, but you need time to think and to process what happened so you can come to terms with it.
- Don't drink excessively or use drugs. Alcohol or drugs can blot out painful thoughts for a while, but they will stop you from accepting what has happened. They can also cause depression and other health problems.
- Don't make any other major life changes. Try to put off any big decisions. Your judgment may not be at its best, and you may make choices that you will regret later.

WHEN TO GET PROFESSIONAL HELP

Family and friends will probably be able to see you through this difficult time. However, you may need to see a professional if your feelings are too much for you, or persist for too long.

You should probably seek professional assistance if:

- You feel that you are not returning to normal after 3 to 4 weeks
- You can't handle your feelings and feel overwhelmed by sadness, anxiety, or anger.
- You feel very down and depressed most days.
- You have nightmares and cannot sleep.
- You become increasingly withdrawn from other people.
- Friends or family suggest that you seek help.
- You are drinking or smoking too much, or using drugs to cope with your feelings.
- You find yourself acting recklessly, such as speeding, getting into fights, or other risky behavior.
- You find yourself obsessed with a particular hobby and ignore other activities or interests.

WE'RE HERE TO HELP!

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