



Managing Change: Job Loss

The loss of your job is a life changing event. This article describes the kinds of feelings that people have after any traumatic event, what to expect as time goes on, and mentions some ways of coping and coming to terms with what has happened.

Realizing that everyone has a difficult time following a shock can help reduce feelings of isolation and help people understand that the feelings they are experiencing are normal. It is common for individuals to continue to react for some days, or even weeks, following a traumatic event. Although this experience may be shared by you and your colleagues, no two individuals will react in exactly the same way.

Common Reactions Immediately After the Announcement of Job Loss

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 afterwards include the following:

- Anger, confusion, pounding heart, trembling or shaking, fast breathing, sweating, and nausea
- Shock or disbelief at what has happened, feeling numb or unreal, or feeling isolated or detached from other people
- Denial—you can't accept that it has happened—so you behave as though it hasn't.

Reactions Over the Coming Days and Weeks

People react differently and take different amounts 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 traumatic event
- 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
- Guilt and self-doubt—people may feel that they could have done something to prevent the event
- Anger or irritability at what has happened, at the senselessness of it all, or at what caused this to happen (often asking, "Why them?" or "Why me?")

Sometimes a person has feelings of depression and anxiety that go on for several weeks and may get worse. If these feelings go on for a long period of time, it is likely that additional help from some type of professional (possibly a counselor) may be necessary.

What can help?

The best approach, immediately after the announcement of job loss, is to accept that you will be distressed—this is normal. At this stage, others can help greatly by letting you talk about it if you want to. 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.

However, forcing someone to talk about it when they don't want to may not be helpful. Sometimes, people find it easier to talk to other people rather than their families. Professional help may be needed in order to get back to normal more quickly, and to prevent or reduce the harmful effects of prolonged stress reactions.

Looking After Yourself Following the Announcement of Job Loss or Layoff

- Try to get back into your normal routine as soon as possible.
- Make sure that you are doing things that are relaxing and enjoyable outside of work.
- Spend time with friends who are supportive and understand what you are going through.
- Talk to your family and friends about your job loss, as this will help you to get over your feelings.
- Take some time for yourself.
- Work on your general stress levels by ensuring that you have adequate sleep, a good diet, and regular exercise. Relaxation techniques may help to reduce tension.

What Not to Do

- Don't bottle up your feelings. Strong feelings are natural. Don't feel embarrassed about them. Bottling them up can make you feel worse and can damage your health. Let yourself talk about what has happened and how you feel.
- 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. Listen to advice from people you respect and trust.

When should I 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 and obsess a lot.
- You have nightmares and cannot sleep.
- You become more and more withdrawn from other people.
- People around you 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.

Additional resources are available from Encompass, CMU's employee assistance program (EAP) provider. Find more information [here](#).