

The Search - Accentuating the Positive After a Layoff

New York Times - August 16, 2009 - After a layoff, your self-esteem and personal relationships may take a hit. Your bank account and quality of life may both spiral downward. You may not even be sure you can pay your mortgage or rent. And now you're supposed to go out and convince employers that you'd be a great hire?

Desperation, hopelessness, depression, anger; these are not useful feelings to bring to a job search.

Yet after a layoff, it is normal to experience some or all of them. And the longer joblessness lasts, the greater the emotional toll it can exact.

Ford R. Myers, a career coach, author and president of Career Potential in Philadelphia, says it is taking his clients 20 percent to 25 percent longer, on average, to land a job than it did before the recession.

If desperation levels could be measured, they would surely be higher, too. And "if you're feeling desperate the employer can smell it a mile away," Mr. Myers said.

Now, a certain amount of acting more confident than you really feel may be in order at interviews, but there are ways you can genuinely take the edge off your negative emotions.

It's important to work through the negative feelings you experience because of a layoff, said Nancy Molitor, public education coordinator for the American Psychological Association and a psychologist in private practice in Wilmette, Illinois.

Being laid off "is a profound loss," Dr. Molitor said. It can lead to feelings of:

- Humiliation
- Embarrassment
- Sadness
- Guilt
- Frustration

And if you are supporting other people financially, a host of other powerful emotions and worries can be released, she said.

Consider, too, that a layoff removes people from the structure and camaraderie of daily working life and can plunge them into unaccustomed isolation, a possible precursor to stress and depression.

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Periodically, you may need to “Download” all your emotions, that is, to write them down or discuss them with a trusted friend who won’t criticize or judge you, Dr. Molitor said. Then identify which things you can control and which you can’t.

Throughout your search, make detailed lists of the things you have done and still need to do, she said.

If you keep your emotions bottled up, “...you’re going to have stress symptoms later,” she said. These can include:

- Insomnia
- Panic attacks
- Colds brought on by a weakened immune system.

And these will make you perform all the worse during an interview!

Mentally, stress can distort your perspective. “When we get stressed, the brain is sometimes ineffective at processing things rationally,” Dr. Molitor said. In short, things may not be nearly as bad as they appear, and you have more control over your situation than you think.

Get help from your primary care doctor if you have symptoms like insomnia, she said. You may need to see a mental health professional if you are experiencing:

- Anxiety
- Depression
- Other symptoms.

If you believe that you have lost your health insurance, check with your former human resources department about your post layoff benefits. “Don’t assume that you don’t have coverage,” Dr. Molitor said.

Maybe your doctor or therapist can work out a payment plan, she advised. If not, she said, check with your county’s public health department about services available to people without insurance.

Dr. Molitor said that getting help can give you back your perspective, the ability to say: “O.K., this is terrible but it’s already happened. I have to focus on what I can control going forward.”

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It's hard to look for a job when you don't know if you can keep a roof over your head or put food on the table.

A realistic review of your finances is crucial to your emotional well being. Question all your expenses, advised Eric Tyson, a personal finance expert and author.

He also recommends these steps:

- Try to avoid dropping insurance entirely
- In some cases you can raise the deductible
- Transfer credit card balances to a card with a lower rate, or try to negotiate lower rates on your current cards
- Use a debit card; this can prevent you from spending money that you don't have
- If you own a home, you may want to rent out a room or rooms
- If you are a renter, you may need to move to a cheaper place
- You may even need to move in with a family member or a friend for a time.

Think to yourself: "I'm going to do this for a year or two until I get my feet back on the ground, and then I'm out of here," Mr. Tyson said.

Be creative about ways to generate income, he said. Take part-time, temporary, freelance or contract jobs; preferably related to your professional field in some way.

If you aren't working at all, at least get dressed and get out of the house, Mr. Myers said, and "...take advantage of seminars and workshops in your area that have to do with careers and job search."

Keep networking even if you aren't in the mood for it, he added.

Finally, a note to friends, family members and former colleagues of the unemployed: Be available to lend a sympathetic and nonjudgmental ear and, if you can, to offer other types of help — for example, job leads or temporary lodging.

Just hearing "I'm here for you!" can mean a lot to an unemployed person, Dr. Molitor said.

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