



## SURVIVING TOUGH TIMES

HACE E-23-10

### ACCEPTING YOUR FEELINGS

People respond to unemployment with many feelings: anger, anxiety, outrage, self doubt. They may be hostile . . . lashing out at those closest to them. Or, they may become moody and depressed. Their tension may show up as restlessness, loss of appetite, loss of interest in sex, insomnia, and feelings of apathy and exhaustion. While some of these symptoms may be unpleasant, they are normal, predictable reactions of people experiencing a loss or critical change in their lives.

Recognizing these strong feelings, understanding why they may be present, and dealing with them in positive ways is important. Denying them and acting as if they don't exist can cause physical and emotional damage.

The first step to accepting feelings is to sort out and identify your feelings. Some feelings . . . often those that are painful . . . may become so buried you may not even be aware they exist.

#### **Anger Has Many Causes and Risks**

One of the first feelings you will probably identify is anger. Anger is a powerful emotion that is often viewed negatively. Someone who has lost his or her job certainly has a right to be angry . . . for a reasonable amount of time. What's important, is how that anger is handled. Unchecked, it can escalate into a rage that may erupt in damaging emotional outbursts or be unleashed on family members.

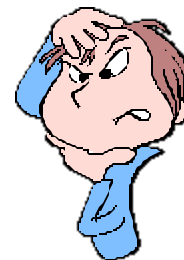
Unchecked anger can be an emotional "time bomb," exploding when triggered by little things such as a spilled glass of milk or a spouse asking how the job hunt went today.



Long-term anger can even be damaging to your health. Elevated blood pressure, poor diet habits, and lack of physical activity can put your physical health at risk.

Looking beyond the anger, you may begin to uncover many other emotions hidden underneath. Anger may stem from feeling of failure, being unappreciated, exploited, manipulated, uncared for or humiliated. It may be caused by feelings of helplessness, worthlessness, frustration, anxiety, guilt, fear, or resentment.

Remember, the power of strong emotions like anger can disrupt thinking and learning. When you need your brain the most, you may find yourself unable to think straight! So, now more than ever, it is important to look at the variety of feelings behind the anger and try to understand the hidden feelings. Then you can find ways to express your feelings in positive ways.



## Evaluate Your Anger

- Look behind your anger. Remember exactly where you were when you first felt it. Who was with you? How did you feel at the time?
- Ask yourself if your anger is reasonable. Are you expecting too much from yourself or someone else? Are you looking at your situation objectively?
- Look at your reaction to the anger. Was the behavior justified? Did it increase your stress level or threaten your friendship with those around you? If so, look immediately for more appropriate ways to discharge your anger.
- Anger is often fueled by blame. Blaming yourself or others is a way of avoiding the problem. The energy you spend blaming could be better spent on working to understand your feelings.

## Damage to Self-Esteem

Feeling good about yourself, or having high self-esteem, is one of the most valuable assets you can have. Self-esteem develops as we grow from childhood into adulthood. The love and acceptance we get from parents, family members and friends shapes our self-esteem. It's linked to how competent and successful we feel.



Having positive feelings about yourself is easier when things go well. When things take a turn for the worse, you often lose some of your self-confidence and begin to doubt yourself.

Whether it's your first time being unemployed, or whether you have been without a job before, you may feel a sense of loss that extends well beyond losing a paycheck. Work contributes to your identity. It helps define who you are and makes you part of a larger community. Work helps you feel you belong and are important because you have something to contribute.

In many ways, losing a job is like losing part of yourself. Your lifestyle suddenly changes. Schedules and routines that controlled a large part of your time are no longer there. You lose contact with former co-workers and friends.

Many unemployed people report going through a process of grief and mourning in response to a job loss. This loss is characterized by stages of denial, anger, depression, and finally, acceptance. With the help of those around them, most people eventually work out ways of dealing with their feelings. They make adjustments that help them recover from their loss and put it in perspective.

Focusing on activities and people that give your life "meaning" also helps put job loss into perspective. That may mean devoting more time to family, religious activities or worthwhile community projects.

## Understanding Your Feelings

If you are not used to thinking about your feelings, identifying them during this stressful period may be difficult. Confronting your feelings and looking realistically at your situation are important steps to being able to cope. Whether positive or negative, your feelings are okay. They are all natural reactions to a job loss. Recognizing their existence and accepting them is important to your mental and physical health.

## **Beware of Pitfalls**

- Taking refuge in your “cave” may provide temporary comfort, but is little help if your time spent there is not constructive. Surrounding yourself with positive, supportive family and friends may better help your self-esteem.
- Venting your anger and frustrations may only make you feel worse if you find yourself in the middle of a “pity party.” There are people who actually enjoy misery and the misfortune of others.
- Drinking is at best a temporary relief, and for some people, can lead to a crippling addiction.

## **Steps to Accepting Your Feelings and Moving On**

- Talk with your family. Your family may share some of the same feelings you have. By talking about your feelings, you can help each other express, vent and accept these feelings in constructive ways. Together your family can provide the support and reassurance necessary to help boost everyone’s self-esteem.
- Take mental health breaks. Think of ways to reduce the emotional tension and stress you’re experiencing. Take some time for the things you enjoy. Include regular physical exercise in your daily routine to help you work off your worries and help your overall well-being.
- Make the most of your time. Don’t get in the habit of sleeping late or spending your time in front of the television. How many times in the past have you wished you had more time to spend with your kids, to work on projects around the house, visit friends, go fishing or catch up on some reading? When stress is high and you’re feeling down, you may not be in the mood to try new things. But these feelings don’t last forever. Once you have worked through them, put your time to good use. Working on

projects, starting a hobby or doing volunteer work can help lead to new employment opportunities.

- Take on some of the home responsibilities of other family members. Everyone feels better when they are needed and appreciated. Taking on some of your spouse’s chores, cooking, shopping, mowing the lawn, etc., will help improve everyone’s outlook.
- Evaluate your situation. If it looks like your unemployment may be permanent, shift gears and begin looking for other types of work. You may want to get help analyzing your skills and finding out about any additional training that can help you qualify for another job or career. Doing this before your benefits run out can brighten your prospects for re-employment.
- Recognize the need for professional help. The feelings associated with a job loss are very powerful and may be difficult to deal with on your own. Talking to a trained professional can help you work through your feelings and restore your self-esteem.
- Take this special time to “count your blessings.” As you count, make sure you count ALL your assets, especially those that are priceless; supportive family, church and friends, talents, health, etc. You just might find out that your assets far outweigh your losses!

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*Surviving Tough Times* is a 19-part series for individuals and families experiencing under-employment and unemployment. Originally developed by Linda Boelter, University of Wisconsin Cooperative Extension Service.

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