

DON'T DOUBT YOURSELF! YOU WILL FIND A JOB

Dr. John Schinnerer

I have had hundreds of conversations with job seekers in an attempt to aid them in their search and to offer emotional support during a stressful time. While attempting to remain relatively humble, I have had some tremendous success in elevating their mood, reinstilling their self-confidence and reinvigorating their motivation. Naturally, the tone and content of these conversations varies depending on how long the job seeker has been looking for work. Before I share how I raise their mood, and self-esteem, let me briefly cover the five stages of unemployment to provide a framework to improve your understanding of the processes involved. The framework is adapted from Kaufman's article entitled "Professionals in search of work: Coping with the stress of job loss and underemployment."

Stages of Unemployment

There are five stages of unemployment. Each stage is time delimited and carries with it certain psychological and behavioral characteristics.

Stage 1 – Anticipatory Job Loss

Briefly, this is the time of anxiety prior to job loss in which employees realize that the hammer is about to fall. This is often in anticipation of or during layoffs. This stage is primarily marked by extreme anxiety, stress and irritability. Physical symptoms such as stomachaches and headaches may appear.

Stage 2 – Shock, Relief and Relaxation (Initial 2 Months After Job Loss)

The second stage involves those who have been out of work for less than two months. These individuals are still relatively positive and view their newfound freedom as a mini vacation. Psychological reactions may include the following: Initial shock of losing their job; enjoyment of the reduction in stress and fatigue; a positive mental state in terms of self-esteem, life satisfaction and hopefulness and anger at their former employer which is proportional to how the layoff was handled. Typical behavioral responses include treating the job loss as a temporary vacation; maintaining normal social relationships while not telling others about the job loss; and venting anger about former employer to close friends and family. In this stage, the individual initially feels some disbelief, followed by a reduction in the anxiety related to the uncertainty and stress that may have preceded the job loss. Optimism is fairly high at this point.

Stage 3 – Concerted Effort to Find a Job (2-4 Months After Job Loss)

Those that have been out of work 2 –to 4 months typically begin their job search with earnest and fervor. Vacation is over and reality has set in. Stress may have increased depending on financial security and degree of social support. This time is most stressful for those in mid-career. There is a renewed motivation to work, including high initiative and high occupational aspirations. The psychological state usually improves at this phase, in terms of reduced anxiety and increased feelings of person control (due to focused job search efforts). Physical activity is almost completely consumed with finding work and this activity leads to greater social support. If a job is not found after 4 to 5 months, the person's mental state, especially mood, typically begins to decline.

Stage 4 – Self-doubt And Anger (5-6 Months After Job Loss)

Job seekers who have been hitting the pavement for 5 to 6 months struggle with internal frustration and begin to question their ability to find a job. Their motivation decreases due to a discouraged mood. This leads to lower initiative, lowered occupational aspirations (e.g., taking the first job that comes along regardless of position) and occupational identity problems (e.g., "Did I really deserve to be a VP of Sales"?). While hope remains, their mood deteriorates into high anxiety or fearfulness and extreme irritability. At this point, the career search becomes erratic and many consider career changes. This stage is often marked by conflict with family and friends and psychosomatic disorders (i.e., physical conditions that have no physiological basis), such as muscle spasm, headaches and illness.

Stage 5 – Resignation and Withdrawal (7 months and On)

While those who have been looking for over seven months are fighting depression, self-doubt and hopelessness and perhaps suicidal thoughts. Many become resigned to being jobless.

Most begin to severely doubt themselves, their skill sets and their professional qualifications. Self-esteem, motivation and feelings of control over the environment all take a nosedive. Looking for a job often takes a backseat to staying in bed for long periods of time. Social circles narrow to just family and a few close friends. It is during the final two stages that I typically extend a hand and ask someone out to coffee. The mere act of asking someone out to a chat is a positive step in the right direction. During our coffee, I ask them how things are going and let them vent for a while. I listen with the intent of truly hearing them. Once they have had a chance to speak their mind, I begin sharing my view on how they can best help themselves. It sounds something like this... It's not you, it's the economy!

First, don't doubt your abilities or your qualifications. You are a highly qualified, intelligent, capable person. I have met many individuals in the past three years who are looking for work and are some of the finest, brightest and most capable people I've ever met. The fact that you are out of work and having a rough time finding a job is not a negative reflection of you. It is a reflection of the economy. Believe in yourself. You are a good person. You will find another job.

Begin Your Search Anew

Second, consider today the first day of your job search. Start anew. Wipe the slate clean. Begin today with the knowledge you have gathered over the past several months about how to pursue a job.

Networking and Volunteering

The best way, in my opinion, to find employment is by networking. What professional or industry organizations do you belong to? Do they have a job search group? If so, join it. If not, can you start one with their cooperation? The best way to pull oneself out of a down mood is to help others. Volunteering is a great way to meet people, expand your network and improve your mood. If you are having a hard time going into a room of people alone, ask a friend or fellow job seeker to accompany you. Volunteer to speak at conferences, lunches and seminars. Volunteer to assist with registration and facilitate the meetings for any and all professional or industry groups. Always have a business card and resume ready to distribute to willing individuals. When networking, always try to offer something of value to the other party first as a show of good faith. This can be as little as a piece of information or a cup of coffee. However, you don't want to make the mistake of asking without giving in return. The goal is to build relationships and the basis for relationships is trust. To help establish trust, always give of yourself first.

Take Everyone You Know Out To Coffee

Ask people in your network out to coffee or lunch. Tell them you are looking for a job and ask them to keep you in mind. Bring a list of companies with you that you are targeting and ask the individual if they know anyone they could refer you to at any of the companies. Use these warm referrals as leverage for informational interviews. These should be no more than 20 minutes in length. Do not take your resume. The purpose is to get referrals to other people who can help you in your search. Pre-script what you want to say when you initially call the person to ask for an informational interview and visualize the outcome.

A Reality Check

If the individual is truly depressed, I offer a brief reality check. I remind them that they are in an extremely stressful situation and to treat it as such. Along with exercise and proper diet, I suggest they see their doctor to discuss temporarily using an antidepressant. An antidepressant serves at least two functions in this case. It helps to improve the mood, which comes across in interviews. Most companies don't want to hire people who come across as lacking confidence, depressed and low energy (which is what happens when you are depressed). Also, an antidepressant increases tolerance for stress during a stressful time.

Focus On Effort Over Outcome

Focus on your EFFORTS, not your outcomes. In other words, congratulate yourself for networking, putting yourself out there day after day, writing letters, emailing, revising the resume, and for getting an interview or return phone call. Regardless of the outcome, tell yourself you've done great work. Know that you have given it your best shot each day.

Focus On The Present

Keep your focus to the present day. The past is going and we can't change it. The future is not here and we can only prepare for it. Focus on giving each day your best effort. Wake up with a smile and refer back to it frequently all day long. Focus on what you can control.

In conclusion, keep in mind that this is a very difficult economy for everyone. Everyone I've spoken with is anxious. Those that have jobs are worried about keeping them. Those that don't are worried about finding one. I'm confident however, that the economy will eventually return. You will find a job. Things will improve. Have faith.

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