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JOB LOSS

Tunneling Out

Anywhere from a few days to a few months into our journey from job loss to recovery we reach a personal plateau of maximum tension, uncertainty and confusion. Waves of emotion may leave us feeling angry, guilty, sad, anxious, isolated or lonely. We can obsess on our loss, re-living the experience. We look for differences like sex, race, religion, or politics to rationalize why others remain working. We can cry or rage without warning. We ask, “Could I have done more?” “What’s wrong with me?” We can’t escape near constant fear and apprehension about the future.

Withdrawal, distraction and avoidance are typical behaviors of this emotional plateau. Friends and family may notice a retreat from relationships and a fixation on television, computer games, or substance abuse—distractions to avoid reflection. Sarah vividly recalls the embarrassment of not working and the fear she’d never work again. She rejected those close to her, “I actually asked God to take me ...I was in depression but my family wanted me out of it...” The pain is real and needs acknowledgement in order to deal with its impact.

Among all the reverberations of losing a job, one of the most painful is the havoc on the family. During this period of emotional turmoil, personal fear and stress can be corrosive for relationships. Vocational dislocation disrupts comfortable relationship patterns and roles. Families struggle to help, says Donna, a career development specialist, but they “cannot be objective because their lives are at stake too.” As well as suffering the same emotional storm, the family also shoulders the brunt of providing encouragement and support. However, experts emphasize that couples who work through this adversity together often emerge with a better relationship.

Emotional stress sweeps through the whole family. Children intuitively sense your emotions and may feel they are to blame, “I tried to pretend nothing had changed until the day my six-year old blurted, ‘I just want my Mommy back!’” Talk with them honestly and focus on a positive outcome. This includes them in the solution and provides words to use when others talk to them about it.

Both partners need to understand that their feelings and sense of urgency may be

out of sync. “I felt resentful when Sandi would come home and talk about her job,” recalls Doug. However, Sandi was annoyed at the amount of TV Doug watched during his hunt for new employment. Both say that this was one of the most strained times in their 15 years of marriage.

There is never a more important time to communicate. Talk things through. Perhaps you can temporarily renegotiate (not reassign) some household duties. Recognize that job hunting is work and it deserves some downtime. Offer help cautiously. What might seem innocent can easily be interpreted as a nag or a hint that you do not think your partner is able to handle their own job hunt. Be certain your partner understands it is okay to refuse an offer to help. Remember, self-esteem has already been dealt a heavy blow.

It is easy to fall into behaviours that can impair recovery. Commonly, to cope with the fear and helplessness we feel, we may turn our partner’s job search into our own project. This can rob them of their own recovery process and create serious issues later. Instead, keep talking and help your partner avoid catastrophic thinking —“I’ll never get a job, or we’re going to lose everything.”

Not all distractions are bad. Deliberate communication helps offset withdrawal and depression. Jim’s wife Eileen, made a weekly date at a café where they planned the coming week together during her husband’s job search. “We usually ended up talking about other things,” Jim remembers.

There will be good days and bad days. Because the urge to withdraw may be strong for both of you, keep up social commitments and share your experiences with trusted friends who will want to support you. Fear will try to displace

joy. Plan time for activities that help you let off steam and just have fun together. Experiencing a little joy is key to turning this page in your lives.

Keeping Connected

My wife called a buddy and said, “He needs company, just take him for a beer!” *Derek*

“Bob and I made a game out of creating cheap dates. It was kind of like when we were kids again.” *Bonnie*

“Because I was home, I could volunteer at school for the first time. It thrilled my kids and I actually had fun!” *Rick*

“My wife never shot down my ideas. She’d listen and talk them through.” *David*

“I am a pretty quiet guy and don’t like socializing much, so I just volunteered to do some little chores for my friends and neighbours. That made getting out a little easier.” *Darryl*

Names have been changed to protect the privacy of the interviewees.

Published by:



Northwest Training and Adjustment Board

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