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Unemployment Blues: Losing Ourselves

By Virginia Bola, PsyD

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When we lose our jobs, no matter the reason, we lose a big part of our identity. Think of the last several times you met new people. After names are exchanged and polite comments made on whatever event you are attending, the question quickly arises: "What do you do?"

It's a pleasant starting point for conversation and usually gives rise to many questions or a lively discussion. It also allows us to measure and preliminarily judge each other. Until we really start to know someone as an individual, we tend to deal in broad generalizations and stereotypes. By learning what work a stranger performs, we start making assumptions about their values: education, social ranking, work ethic, and personal priorities. Meet someone and talk for a while and unconsciously you are assessing and categorizing, much based on occupational data. Meet a custodian, a plumber, a nurse, or an attorney. Notwithstanding your actual conversation, you have made character judgments that may have little basis in reality but which allows you to fit that person in a suitable niche in your mental organization.

When I can no longer say proudly "I'm a mechanic" or "I am a computer operator" my self-esteem plummets. Meet a stranger and admit that I am unemployed, perhaps have been for an extended period of time, and I watch my stature diminish in your eyes. I can talk about what I used to do but I feel somehow tainted and incomplete. I talk too much about why I have no job because I want you to realize that it's not my fault, that I really want to work, that there's nothing wrong with me.

The scourge of unemployment is what it does to our minds. We may have watched as our position moved overseas. We may have sensed that our department was running over budget. We may have known that the company was seeking to cut costs. But unless the entire company closed down, or relocated out of state, we believe in our hearts that we were selected for lay off, over someone else, for a reason. And, being human and vulnerable, we blame ourselves.

Who has ever been terminated, even from a job you don't particularly like, without ruminating over what you could have done differently which might have changed the final outcome. "I should have . . . worked Saturdays to do that extra project, been more willing to train the boss's idiot son, socialized

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more with the in-crowd." Whatever it is, you feel guilty. "If I had handled things differently, my family wouldn't be suffering the way they are." You feel not quite good enough, not up to par. Your negative mental tapes start replaying in your head and you start generalizing about yourself and your lack of worth. You remind yourself of all the negative things you've done in life and look at yourself as a failure "Why do I always blow it?"

STOP IT!

That's a lot easier to say than do, I know. But, it's worth a try. Start by listing all of your positive accomplishments (take your time over this, add items later as you think about them). Anything relating to work is going to be valuable to put in your resume but there is more to life than work so look at other areas too. If your children are not in jail or strung out on drugs, include "good parenting skills" in your

list — you must be doing something right. Include major activities: taking night classes while continuing to work, coaching little league, volunteering for a charity drive, running a household while working full time. When you run out of major areas, start concentrating on smaller items such as cleaning the house, taking your parents out for a special dinner, losing those 10 pounds which had been bothering you. **KEEP ON LISTING** until you have pages of positive personal accomplishments over your lifetime, from an A grade in kindergarten to painting the patio last week.

Now compare the list of your positives, all the things that make you what and who you are, the things that make you a valuable and unique human being, and the one item, no current job, that is your primary negative. There really is no comparison at all, is there? Move your mental focus from those old negative tapes by concentrating on all (and there are a lot) of your positives. Keep repeating and redirecting until habit kicks in and your mental outlook slowly changes.

Your self-esteem will improve, your self-confidence reassert itself, your belief in your own worth blossom. Now you are ready to tackle the demands of job search with higher energy and without that baggage you've been hauling around for too, too long.

Virginia Bola operated a rehabilitation company for 20 years, developing innovative job search techniques for disabled workers, while serving as a respected Vocational Expert in Administrative, Civil and Workers' Compensation Courts. Author of an interactive and emotionally supportive workbook, *The Wolf at the Door: An Unemployment Survival Manual*, and a monthly ezine, *The Worker's Edge*, she can be reached at <http://www.virginiabola.com>

Unemployment Blues: Getting Active

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Unemployment is depressing: financial pressures stress you out, looking for work is humiliating, and your fragile self-confidence reels under the blows of indifference and rejection.

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It becomes harder to get up in the morning, to take care of yourself, to be supportive and loving to those around you, to swing energetically into job search activities.

Here are 7 tips on beating those I-want-to-get-a-job-but-nobody-wants-me blues.

1. Create a schedule for your week: 5 hours per day (maximum) of looking for work, 2 hours per day (minimum) of relaxing, having fun with others, and appreciating yourself.
2. Act as if you are still working: get up at your usual time, shower, have your regular breakfast - it will maintain your sense of sense and provide the familiarity of routine and structure in a world in which you are feeling increasingly alienated.
3. Get out of the house. Employers don't make house calls so circulate. Surfing the net for job leads may make you feel as if you are accomplishing something but is often only a means of escape. By all means, post your resume anywhere you can, but then hit the road.
4. Actively nurture your relationships. Avoid letting your misery and self-reproach poison your interactions with those who love you and want to help. Recognize that your loved ones may also be in distress and take the time to go somewhere and do something with family and friends.
5. List your abilities, skills, and positive personal characteristics on a piece of paper. Write down your past successes and triumphs, however small. Read the list daily to remind yourself of your value. Add to the list as you recall other positive qualities.
6. Remind yourself of the realities of the labor market - that most of us will change jobs dozens of times in our working life and many change actual careers several times. Being out of work does not mean that there is something wrong with you, just that it is now your turn to go through this upheaval. Next time it may be your spouse or friend - it is part of the human condition in 21st corporate America.
7. Be kind to yourself. Your self-confidence, self-esteem and self-regard have all been hit with a steel boot. Actively look at yourself with the eyes of a concerned friend and give yourself the support, sympathy, and goodwill that you would extend to anyone you love who had suffered the same fate.

Dr. Bola operated a rehabilitation company, developing innovative job search techniques for disabled workers, for 20 years. A licensed clinical psychologist, she developed vocational programs for the mentally ill, served as a Vocational Expert for Social Security, Civil Court, and pioneered vocational testimony in Workers' Compensation Hearings. She is author of *The Wolf at the Door: An Unemployment Survival Manual* (Authorhouse.com)



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