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Unemployment Blues: Take Back Control

By Virginia Bola, PsyD

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One of the most emotionally crippling aspects of unemployment is the sense of powerlessness it engenders. Job layoff triggers financial pressures, emotional distress, family turmoil, and dashed career hopes. It is forced on us by unrelenting fate, an emotionally disengaged employer, and economic currents that have little to do with us personally. We feel that we have no control over our situation, our lives, our future.

As we work through the anger, resentment, depression, and fear which is the common lot of the jobless, we can take some steps to regain our balance, reclaim a positive focus, and reassert personal control.

1. Daily Routine.

We no longer have the structure of work to mold our days and give meaning to our leisure time. In a very short period of time, we start to drift. Our days are so much the same that we no longer remember what day of the week it is. The line between work and relaxation blurs. We don't work hard enough at our job search so we feel guilty which spoils our play time. Nothing has to be done immediately so we put it all off until tomorrow. Take back control by designing, and maintaining, your own schedule. Get up at the same time each morning, shower and get dressed as if you are going to work. Map out your job hunting activities and stick to the plan. Build in relaxation periods and stick to those too. Having a regular routine, and a defined purpose (finding work) helps you to continue to think of yourself as a worker and a valuable, productive individual, both critical in avoiding the descent into social oblivion prolonged unemployment so often brings.

2. Physical Shape.

We eat when we are anxious. We eat when we are depressed. We eat when we are upset. Couple these psychological urges to eat with the fact that we no longer appear before coworkers' eyes each day, have nothing to dress up for, and have seriously impaired self-respect, and our weight balloons out of control. Fight back by returning to a regimen of regular, healthful eating. So much of our lives is

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out of our control right now that it is a relief to find one area where we are in sole command. Cherish that opportunity by eating sparingly, reducing the amount of time spent in the kitchen, finding non-edible outlets for stress relief. At the same time, start a limited but regular exercise routine. It may not be something you enjoy but at last you have the time to do it and all that huffing and puffing is a wonderful way to temporarily banish your worries.

3. Personal Relations.

You don't really feel like socializing. You are so tense and on edge that you take it out on those closest to you: your family. Make the effort to compartmentalize your life between your career strains and that of your family and friends. If you allow the frustrations of the one to spill over into the other, you are poisoning your best source of needed support and heading towards the personal disaster

—estrangement, divorce, violence — that too frequently accompanies extended unemployment and the wide-ranging destructiveness it spawns.

4. Job Search.

We have no control over when we receive a call for an interview or get that job offer we want so much. What we can control is where we spend our valuable energy. Submitting resumes for openings advertised in the classifieds or on line should be a very minor part of our job search. For every position listed, hundreds of resumes may be submitted. Do the math and it is revealed as similar to buying a lottery ticket — easy and fun to do but unlikely to change your future. Spend your time more wisely by networking with everyone you know (and everyone they know) and calling on employers in your industry to identify openings which have not yet been publicized. Your sense of control arises out of being proactive: putting yourself in the public eye, refusing to passively sit by the telephone awaiting the call which never comes. You may be exhausted at the end of the day, and frustrated if the negative reactions held no hint of possibility, but you do have the self-satisfaction of knowing that you have taken your fate into your own hands and will no longer be relegated to the ranks of those who simply "watch and wait."

5. Community Activities.

You may be relatively inactive in local events or deeply committed to your community. In either case, now is the time to intensify your level of activity. Since you can only productively job search for a limited number of hours per week, use the additional time to become connected. Volunteer for local charities, schools, union halls, hospitals, any communal events you can find. You control where you invest your time and efforts and being productive, even in a small way, can help repair your shattered self-esteem. Interacting with other volunteers is also a whole new opportunity for networking and may indirectly lead to that one golden opportunity you seek.

The world of unemployment, especially if prolonged, can be emotional debilitating. By reasserting control over some aspects of our lives, we can contain the damage inflicted on our psyche and face the future proudly, recognizing that job loss is a regrettable fact of life, not a personal failure.

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.

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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