

Helping a Co-Worker with Job Loss

When someone we care about loses his or her job, there is a huge ripple effect. It impacts the person who has lost the job, but family, friends and former co-workers are also impacted. There is a 'grief process' for the person. Understanding this process can help those around the affected person.

In addition, co-workers can experience a form of guilt, called 'survivor's guilt'. They can feel guilty that they have a job and that their co-worker doesn't. The working person can sometimes sabotage their own employment as a way to not feel guilty. However, some co-workers who are still working can feel some jealousy as their workloads may have increased and their ex-co-workers come in to chat about their severance and free time.

It is useful to understand the reactions people who have lost a job may be having, and the stages they may go through.

SOME STAGES AND REACTIONS POST-JOB LOSS

Recovering from job loss is a process that can take weeks and months. People don't do it on a timetable. They may go through the following stages and reactions:

- Shock and denial: a state of numbness and disbelief that the event has occurred.
- Anger: a feeling of anger at the company, co-workers, family members, etc.
- Guilt: a feeling that you could have done something to prevent the loss.
- Depression: often characterized by changes in appetite, sleep pattern and weight, a sense of being overwhelmed and/or a feeling of sadness that seems never-ending.
- Acceptance: a state of acceptance, or for some, a sense of peace related to life's new reality.
- Growth: a state of readiness to move ahead with one's life and find a new job or other meaningful activity.

Most often, a person feels several of these emotions at the same time, perhaps in different degrees. Eventually, each phase is completed and the person moves ahead.

WHAT TO DO OR SAY?

We would love to take away someone's pain, but we can't. We would like to feel helpful and useful, not helpless and useless. However, sometimes the very best we can do is to provide a compassionate presence. We can be there, offer a touch, a sympathetic "I'm sorry", a helping hand to get a task done. Some things you can do to help your ex-co-worker include:

- Do listen. People will need to talk, express pain, fear, guilt, shock.
- Do be there. Help out with things that need to get done at work or at home.

- Don't take changes in your ex-co-worker personally if you have an ongoing relationship with this person. Your ex-co-worker may become more withdrawn or more irritable for a while.
- Don't let their feelings overwhelm you. You still have a job to do.
- Don't blame the company. Be careful of trying to comfort someone by getting into a 'blame the company' talk fest. This will only bring down your own morale.
- Talk to your manager. Get your own support for reactions you may be having.
- It can take time to adjust to the loss of co-workers. Things may not feel the same for some time.