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How to Survive Unemployment

By Dr. Kathleen Begley
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Note to Readers: *This free e-newsletter, sent only upon request, comes from Dr. Kathleen Begley, owner of Write Company Plus communications training. She writes weekly on topics connected to business and personal success. Dr. Begley recently launched a new blog called "Meandering to a Different Drummer." Click onto the website address at the end of this article to read her one-paragraph musings on life, death, and how to look 10 pounds lighter.*

In a recent op-ed piece entitled "A Scary Reality" in the New York Times, columnist Bob Herbert discussed a little known fact behind today's unemployment statistics. Extrapolating data from a variety of sources, Herbert said the 9.5 rate published by the federal government is totally misleading. Why? It fails to take into account millions of professionals now working far below their former pay grade and millions of others who have given up looking for work after years of searching. Rejection after rejection after rejection from total strangers in human resources departments can do that to you. When these two groups are added to the official figure, Herbert said, unemployment across the United States is a staggering 19 percent.

"For Americans peering anxiously through their family portholes, the economic ship is sinking," Herbert wrote. "You can put whatever kind of gloss you want on last week's job numbers, but the truth is that while they may have been a bit better than most economists were expecting, they were still bad, bad, bad."

I sorrowfully agree. Throughout my career, which began fulltime when I was a 17 Woodstock-era hippie dippie, I have known dozens of men and women who have lost their jobs. But, since the onslaught of the current recession, I have encountered two new phenomena. One is the growing number of two-career couples where both husband and wife have gotten the axe. The other is the large number of corporate honchos who used to control sizable budgets to hire consultants like me whose careers have gone kaput.

In some respects, the current situation makes me happy to have lost my job more than 20 years ago, long before getting the pink slip became a national trend. Getting shown the door in the late 1980's catapulted me into self-employment, which has turned out to be far more enriching and lucrative than my original career.

But back to the national unemployment situation, according to the Times' Herbert. "This should be the biggest story in the United States," Herbert wrote. "When joblessness reaches these kind of extremes, it doesn't just damage individual families; it corrodes entire communities, fosters a sense of hopelessness, and leads to disorder."

To all of you suffering unemployment during the past few years, I wish desperately that I could find you a better position starting tomorrow. Alas, I'm not the Goddess of executive recruitment. I'm also not the Grand Poobahess of classic job-hunting advice. Anyway, I suspect you've already heard enough tips about resumes and networking, thank you very much. What I'd like to share – from my unemployed experience – is how to handle the emotional issues that arise from joblessness. For me, battling shame and despair were far worse than trying to pay bills without any income. So here goes:

Acknowledge your loss. Kissing your livelihood goodbye is on numerous lists of life's top 20 stressors, right there with the death of a spouse and foreclosure on your home. If you don't feel



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like jumping off a bridge or smacking your ex-boss, you're probably in denial about the horror you're facing. The trick is to acknowledge your feelings, which will keep you from actually acting out your negative fantasies. Even though you're longing for three hots and a cot, jail for assaulting the creep who fired you is no answer.

Uproot debilitating ideas. Like many adults, you may have grown up in a family where losing your job was the sign of abject failure. I submit that parents who retired by the 1980's have no point of reference for what you're going through. Back in those fat-and-happy days, most companies terminated only embezzlers, boozers, and other men with comb-overs.

Share your problems. To be honest, I was so devastated by my job loss that I went to a professional therapist. She helped tremendously. You may get relief just by talking to a close friend. The key is to let out the thoughts that are keeping you tossing, turning, and sweating all night.

Be there for others. At the same time I was licking my career wounds, my father was dying. I also was going through an unwanted divorce. Although I was far from being in the best shape to deal with my dad's frail emotional and physical condition, I did my best with the scant inner resources I had at the time. Look around at your family and friends, and I bet you'll find someone who could use an hour or so of your companionship.

Read, read, read. When your financial fears cripple you to the extent of your not being able to get out of bed, stay there. Heck, consider it a perk to spend eight hours under your comforter – a product I think is aptly named. But put some inspirational reading in the bed with you. A book that helped me immensely in my bleakest days was "When Bad Things Happen to Good People" by Harold Kushner.

Get out of the house. Yes, an occasional day in bed is understandable. But occasionally forcing yourself to go for a walk in the park or sip coffee at a café helps keep you in the rhythm of life. At my nadir, I sat in crowded shopping malls wearing a coat over my pajamas just to feel less alone.

Write to me. No kidding. If you missed the drift of this article, here it is: I care about you. I've been there. Because of experience with being cut loose, I have vast reserves of empathy for anyone whose employer has slammed the door in your unsuspecting face. How on earth could this happen? I know the doom and gloom you may be experiencing. As a result, I'm happy to be your extremely supportive email pal.

Dr. Kathleen Begley has written seven books and gives corporate seminars on topics such as writing persuasively, presenting confidently, and managing positively. You can call her at 610-429-1562 or e-mail her at KBegley@writecompanyplus.com. She responds to everybody. If you feel you've become too busy to ever read this free, opt-in blogletter, please tell us to remove you from our mailing list. Although our feelings will be deeply hurt, we'll cheerfully delete you.