



Unemployment Anxiety

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President's Message

Many of us have patients, family, or friends who are facing the dire circumstances of unemployment. In January 2009 598,000 new people were added to the ranks of the unemployed in the United States, for a total unemployment rate of 7.6% and a total of unemployed people reaching 11.6 million (<http://stats.bls.gov/news.release/empsit.nr0.htm>). Historically, the current rate is high and is likely to go higher—perhaps to 9% or 10%. Even though recessions eventually come to an end—and we hope that the current one will end this year—the experience of unemployment can take a severe toll on the individuals and their families who are affected.

Unemployment is associated with increased alcohol abuse and increased use of mental health services (Jin, Shah, & Svoboda, 1995). In a meta-analytic review of 104 studies, unemployment was associated with decreased mental health, life satisfaction, and subjective and objective physical well-being. Duration of unemployment also affects health indices (McKee-Ryan, Song, Wanberg, & Kinicki, 2005). Unemployment is related to increased risk for suicide (Preti, 2003). These data may not be surprising, but they do suggest that mental health professionals need to consider how they can adapt their approach to the specific problems of the unemployed. On a positive note, higher levels of resilience can decrease the negative impact of unemployment (Moorhouse & Caltabiano, 2007). The question addressed in this paper is how we can increase resilience for unemployed people.

What are the problems associated with unemployment? Certainly, loss of income is a significant stressor for many, although there is a cushion for some with severance packages and unemployment insurance. Seldom, however, will these be sufficient as unemployment drags on. Yet, this loss of income is moderated by the perception of what the loss entails. We have found that some people have more difficulty readjusting their spending habits to stay within a reasonable budget. Thus, their unemployment may be complicated by increased consumer debt at exorbitant rates. Planning a budget and considering the elasticity of expenses is a good place to begin. Some individuals have used this period of unemploy-

ment to reassess what they “truly need” and, after they are reemployed, they benefit from this new awareness by more prudent spending and saving patterns. We can ask, “What can you learn about spending and saving that you can use in the future?”

Job loss often involves loss of daily structure, opportunities for feeling competent, social support, and status. Many unemployed individuals may find themselves listlessly going through their days, with lower levels of activity and a sense of aimlessness. Increased rumination often sets in, adding to the risk of depression. Bill was laid off and took an adaptive, behavioral activation approach to his situation. He structured each day with “searching for a job.” This included making a list of possible contacts in his network of acquaintances and professional associates. He diligently contacted people in the network, telling them that he had been laid off and asking for potential leads. Of course, this was often frustrating, but he viewed searching for a job as a “numbers game”—“The more people I call, the closer I am getting to a job.” He scheduled time to search the Internet, company websites, and other resources. In addition to his job search, he increased his exercise program, scheduling something on a daily basis. He also used the extra time available to help out at home, spend more time with his children, and to pursue recreational activities (such as golf). Eventually, Bill got a job and had mixed feelings about returning to work: “I will miss the free time I had.”

Along with behavioral activation, many unemployed people can benefit from cognitive restructuring of their negative thoughts regarding their position. Self-criticism is often a consequence of unemployment. Identifying cognitive distortions, such as labeling (“I am a loser”), personalizing (“Why me?”), discounting the positives (“It doesn’t matter that I am educated or a hard worker”), and all-or-nothing thinking (“I can’t do anything right”), are good targets for evaluation. Hopelessness is often based on overestimating the importance of the current situation and relying on emotional reasoning to predict the future. For example, “I’m unemployed now, so I’ll never get a job” can be countered by examining

the evidence that unemployment rates rise and fall and the job market is continuously fluid. Normalizing the experience of unemployment—especially by looking at economic and structural factors (market trends, down-sizing)—can help dispel self-blame. For many, unemployment is associated with decreased status, a sense of humiliation and shame, and the perception that they may be ostracized. Again, cognitive therapists can help by employing the double-standard technique (“How would you feel about someone you know who has lost their job? Why would you be kinder to them than you are to yourself?”). Identifying other people who have been unemployed and who are now employed helps reduce the stigma and the sense of hopelessness associated with this issue. Another helpful question is to ask, “What evidence do you have that people think less of you because you have lost your job?” Or, to take it further, “Why should you care what they may think? Perhaps this is a time to find out who is a real friend.”

Since unemployment is generally a temporary situation, we can consider increasing flexibility about time. For example, one man who had been out of work for 5 months had a sense of desperation about finding a new job. When I asked him, “Why not extend the period of time to look for a job? What is the urgency?” his anxiety decreased. It occurred to him that the period of time was arbitrary and, fortunately, he still had adequate resources to continue to pay his bills.

Finally, it is helpful for some unemployed people to view their time away from a job as an op-

portunity to develop new job skills. I have used the term “sabbatical” with some of my patients to help them recognize that they can profit from this time in terms of expanding their repertoire of skills that they can offer. This helps structure the day, provides opportunities to feel competent, and builds a sense of resilience that one can possibly come out of this in a better position to market one’s abilities in an ever-changing world.

References

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