

The Secret to Surviving Redundancy



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High-flying editor Louise Chunn was devastated by her sacking. Could a new handbook for the unemployed have helped?

Losing your job is the pits. One minute you're passing time in the MD's swanky top floor office, chatting about the weather while your PA makes your latte: the next you're sliding down a snake with no idea where — or how — you're going to land.

That's what happened to me nearly five years ago. Once I'd picked myself up from my snakes-and-ladders ride to the exit, I found myself wandering through the West End, like a member of the undead. Excuse me — the unemployed. All around were people chatting and laughing; in my head was a cacophony of screaming torment. You don't really know how you value yourself until the carpet is pulled from under your feet and you're spread-eagled on the floor.

Just thinking about it still makes me feel a little woozy, and I'd certainly file it under "one of my worst life experiences". For months afterwards I felt I was a failure and would never get another

job anything like the one I had lost — editing one of the UK's best-known magazines, with a staff of 40 and a multimillion pound turnover.

I wasn't alone though. Since Britain's economy hit the skids, we've all traded horror stories of unceremonious sackings and mass redundancies. There are 2.49 million people currently unemployed in the UK, with almost a third of those taking more than a year to find their next job. The effects are harsh: apart from death of a spouse or a child, there is no greater indicator for suicide risk. With ever longer lists of applicants for every job, nobody even expects a reply to their application these days, unless they're one of the lucky few to be called for an interview. It's a cold, hard world for the jobless.

So I was intrigued to read a new self-help book — not one that tells you how to get another job or how to write a CV, but a handbook of psychological tools to help people to cope when the worst happens.

Would *Keeping Your Head after Losing Your Job*, by the renowned psychologist Dr Robert. L. Leahy, have made my post-sack life easier?

Dr Leahy is a specialist in cognitive behavioural therapy, with 22 books to his name. He has seen first-hand, in his New York clinic, how “unemployment can demoralise and humiliate the very best of people”, and so felt an urgent need to write this book.

“Even though the chances are quite good that someone will experience unemployment at some point in their work history, no one has ever trained us how to cope,” he says. “People isolate themselves and feel ashamed, and believe everyone thinks they're a failure.” I nod and wince as we talk down the phone, remembering feeling just that, and how it made it hard to even meet up with supportive former colleagues. I had gone from a glamorous, *Devil Wears Prada* lifestyle to filling time cleaning out my basement, and was at a loss to work out what came next.

When someone who has been sacked ends up in Dr Leahy's office, his initial piece of advice is critical: “Don't think of yourself as a loser. It's a situation you're in, it's not you personally.” The key, he says, is not to get stuck in a cycle of negative thinking.

For obvious reasons, one of the primary concerns for those who have lost their jobs is money. Leahy encourages the newly unemployed to give their household accounts a thorough going over, itemising projected outgoings area by area.

“People often rush to the conclusion that everything is a catastrophe — without a regular salary immediately replacing their old income, they will lose their house, their wife will leave them, and so on.” But as he writes in the book: “Jumping to conclusions can get you to jump off a bridge.” Personally, I never felt that bad though I did make some rash job applications in areas I'd never seen myself, such as daytime TV. It's sometimes hard to remember the simple fact: most unemployed people do get another job, eventually.

His advice is not to launch straight into a frenzied job hunt, but instead take a breather. People are often suspicious that their job is at risk long before they're told the truth, which leaves them in a fragile state of mind and in need of recuperation.

“It helps if you can imagine unemployment coming ‘with benefits’,” he says. “You suddenly have a lot of time, so don't just sit in your room feeling bitter, worrying about your future, or your

finances. Use the time: you can do things you've always wanted to. See it as a sabbatical to work on a special project."

This is a piece of advice I could have used. While I was unemployed I felt my time should be devoted to trying to drop the "un". I later wished I'd put my "free time" to better use: learnt a language, worked for a charity, something tangible that I could have thrown my energies into.

If you don't have the desire to work on a personal project, it's important to ensure you still have structure in your day. "See friends, go for a walk or a run, get in touch with former colleagues or old college or school friends. You should aim to make your day productive, not depressing," he says.

He points out that more than two out of every five jobs these days are found via social networks. By staying in touch with people, via LinkedIn, Facebook or Twitter, unemployed people will find the "jobless" state is considered fairly normal, as many users are freelance, and happily so, and it may even increase their chances of finding work.

Finally, Leahy believes we shouldn't overcomplicate the process of finding a new job — it's a simple case of logic and determination: "The same lesson is true for everyone really — if you want to get somewhere, you have to plan and prepare for what you want. You have to learn to delay gratification, and you have to persevere. It's like in sports, showing up is simply not enough, and it never was."

For me, it was 12 months before I was re-hired — as the editor of *Psychologies* magazine. It was a thrilling moment, and as I heard the words "we'd like to offer you the job . . ." I felt a huge sense of empowerment.

Looking back, I don't regret my year of unemployment. It was a humbling experience, and anything that makes you reassess your life is good for you.

I'd go as far as to say that I'm a more emotionally intelligent person than I was before — and that can't be bad.

If, like me, you hit the buffers at some stage, it's important to remember that you can get yourself back in the game. The stomach-lurching experience of being dropped into the jobless jungle and hacking your way out of it may even — in the long run — make you a better player.

***Keeping Your Head After Losing Your Job*, by Robert L. Leahy (Piatkus, £13.99).** To buy this book visit thetimes.co.uk/bookshop or call 08452712134

10 Tips on How to Cope

What to do

- 1** To shift the feeling that you are a victim you must deal with your anger. That means accepting what has happened is in the past. Move your focus to your present.
- 2** If you find yourself worrying constantly, set a time for such thoughts. When it's over, start doing something else.
- 3** Take time to appreciate what you do have, so that obsessing about status and high income will not seem relevant.
- 4** Do some sums to ensure you're being as careful as you can be with money — and then stop thinking about it.
- 5** Spend time each day job searching, but also do things that will keep your mood buoyed and prevent negative thoughts.

What not to do

- 1** Don't think about yourself as a loser. It's a situation you're in, it's not you personally.
- 2** Don't let this situation make you think everything is a catastrophe: eg, you will have more free time, so take advantage of it to do things you enjoy.
- 3** Don't let your imagination take over — you have to accept uncertainty and give up the feeling that you must be in control.
- 4** Don't push family and friends away. Let them be supportive and help you to adjust.
- 5** Don't let your health suffer. Eat well — but be careful not to overeat — and get plenty of exercise.

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