

The Psychology of Job Loss – Grieving, Misplaced Identity, and Finding Hope

A Series of Career Path Articles on Job Loss, Career Change, and Leadership & Growth at Work

Published by Joanne Bobes, MA, LCSW, Executive Coach, Career Advisor, and Psychotherapist - websites: JoanneBobes.com, email: Joanne@JbobesCoaching.com

Leaving your job is never easy. Whether you are laid off because of organizational changes or if you weren't performing, it affects your ego. If you decided to jump ship because you weren't happy in your role, it can still have residual effects. This article will provide some insight about the impact of job loss on your ego and identity, common feelings, and coping mechanisms that can help you move through a transition period with greater ease and less anxiety. It is notable that just as with other losses in life, there are stages of grief that accompany a job loss. According to [Elisabeth Kübler-Ross](#), the psychiatrist who identified the five stages of grief, the grieving process is not necessarily experienced linearly, and some people might not experience them at all. The stages of grief are denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. They are common stages people go through when grieving, and can happen with death, divorce, or loss of a job. As one of my executive clients in the music business shared so eloquently: "Separating from a long term job where you gave your heart and soul can feel like a grieving process."

If you were laid off from your job because of organizational changes, it may leave you with questions about "why me?" You may wonder why you were let go, but other colleagues weren't. You may wonder why the company couldn't figure out how to keep you in another capacity. Or you may accept that they had to make business decisions, but it still didn't feel good. Your identity is strongly tied to your work life – after all, it is typically where you devote the majority of your waking hours. Your ego may feel slighted; you may feel out of sorts, misplaced, or perhaps that you have "lost your mojo," as one client of mine framed it. You may feel like "I don't know who I am anymore." It is very common to feel depressed, angry, or anxious (or all of the aforementioned). These are all very normal feelings as your identity, for most people, likely feels misplaced.

The impact of job loss on your ego and identity is real. The resulting feelings of distress and a lack of control can be effectively managed. During this transitional time, it's helpful to have some coping mechanisms in place. By definition, a coping mechanism is an adaptation to some kind of environmental stress based on unconscious or conscious choice that enhances control over behavior or gives psychological comfort. Finding ways to feel more in control of your job search is important to ease discomfort, help you to stay focused in a job search, and maintain a sense of hopefulness.

Most people need two kinds of coping mechanisms while in job transition. The first kind I call *tactical coping mechanisms* – which can include: a game plan to stay motivated, an action plan to navigate the job search process, and a strategy to cut back or otherwise

manage your finances. One client of mine in the Bio-tech industry, now a Director of Medicinal Chemistry at the Icahn School of Medicine at Mt Sinai, said he learned how important it is to overcome any fears around networking. His advice: “Be confident about reaching out to people in your network; they will always be willing to help in one way or another.” You may find that some people will make direct contacts for you and open doors or some may provide you with encouragement and emotional support. Developing a target list of organizations you’d ideally like to work with, being strategic and leveraging the LinkedIn platform, and asking for introductions will all help you stay focused in navigating your search. Evaluating your finances, including taking into account your severance or unemployment benefits, will help you consider what to cut back on, and if you need to find interim consulting work or other side jobs while you search for fulltime work. Being tactical can help structure your time and give you focus.

Secondly, I find my clients also need ***emotional coping mechanisms*** to engage in self-care for their mind and body. *Self-care for the mind* can include everything from volunteer work to talking with friends, doing meditation, talking to a coach or counselor, or other activities that nurture you. When I asked a client of mine what helped her during her transition, she said that “...being in touch with a core group of friends that kept me going” made all the difference to help her stay motivated and also maintain a constant feed to network with. Many community mental health centers offer very low cost counseling, and the department of labor offers free workshops and some support resource as well.

Self-care for the body may include exercise, stretching, or anything else that moves your body. Notably, mind-body techniques such as biofeedback (breathing techniques), progressive relaxation, or using the emotional freedom technique (emofree.com) can help you to connect to yourself and stay balanced and centered. Self-care is essential as your ego is managing this shift or the feeling of a “lack” of identity that is closely tied to your work life. Nurturing your emotional state through self-care for the mind and body can be immensely beneficial while in job transition.

Finding the right combination of support, self-care, and resources after a job loss is therefore critical to your identity and to your ego. Any kind of loss or separation conjures up a feeling of a lack of control, and this can be extraordinarily unsettling. Part of my role as a coach is to tap into a spark, a desire to re-connect to work and life with meaning and a sense of purpose. I often suggest that my clients who are in job transition also find meaningful volunteer work with intrinsic value and/or find consulting opportunities to stay in tune with their work identity. Volunteer work can be for a few hours once a month or more; it can reinvigorate you and give perspective on your own situation to work with people who are in more dire circumstances. If you are in transition, or anticipating one, develop a strategy and action plan, consider best ways to nurture your mind and body through self-care, and perhaps of most importance, seek *support, guidance* and a good dose of *hope* from friends, family members, colleagues, a coach, or a counselor. **You can do this.**