



# Living Better With Stress

Losing your job is one of the most stressful events you can experience. Losing a job forces you, against your wishes, to make rapid changes in your life. It is important to continue your normal routines in order to reduce the number of changes you make at one time.

Unemployment can be personally devastating. It can trigger loss reactions similar to those you might feel during other serious crises, such as divorce or the death of someone you love. Stress is a condition of life. Here are some ways to handle the stress of unemployment.

While you are unemployed you may feel tense and angry. You may have mood swings and find yourself lashing out at others. You may experience feelings of frustration that lead to family arguments. You may feel depressed and discouraged. These feelings are normal and common. Other family members usually share some or all of the emotions of the unemployed person, either directly or indirectly. For instance, they may share your same feelings of loss and despair; they may also have to deal with your depression, frustration, and anger.

## Look at the Positive

Losing your job can give you time for self-improvement you may not have had before. Look at the job market and the trends in employment. Take advantage of any career counseling resources in your community.

You may want to use this time to learn a new skill or prepare for a different type of work. This can be done through taking classes or developing a hobby. Think carefully about what types of talents and interests you have and how you can channel them into another type of job.

You can spend more time with your family. You can do things that you didn't have time to do with your children, spouse, or other family members. You can work on household projects that you haven't had time to do. You can do chores with family members and help each other. Physically doing things together will help you emotionally support each other.

Think about devoting some time to volunteer work in your community. This will give you an opportunity to meet other people. They can become part of your resource network.

Volunteer positions also may indicate needs that can develop into new jobs. Volunteer positions may allow you to explore new skills or look at other types of occupations.

## Stress and Your Family

Every member of the family feels the stress of unemployment. Support and communicate with one another. Allow yourself and other family members to express their feelings. Don't talk about "snapping out of it." This denies the seriousness of someone's feelings. (If you or a family member are having trouble working through your feelings, see EC 1398, *Accepting Your Feelings*).

Some roles and responsibilities may need to be changed until you find a new job. Look at the total resources of the family, make a list and

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together decide who can best do what tasks. Be flexible and willing to try new things. Studies show families who directly meet challenges are the most likely to successfully cope with unemployment.

A young wife and mother talked bitterly about her unemployed husband: "When I ask for help or tell him I can't keep working all day and come home to a filthy house, he tells me I'm not turning him into a housewife just because I have a job and he doesn't.

"Or he tells me he's not the maid, or that he still wears the pants in our family and I'd better remember it. Then he doesn't speak for days, or apologizes 40 times or takes off with his friends who got laid off when he did. I never know what he's going to do — but I know what he *isn't* going to do. He isn't going to pay attention to the kids, start dinner, do the grocery shopping or even empty an ashtray."

Change can be difficult, but all family members need to pull together during a crisis such as unemployment. All family members, especially children, do better where parents support each other.

## Take Care of Yourself

In order to better cope with stress, keep your body healthy. Eat balanced meals, get enough sleep and exercise regularly. Maintain a routine. Try to maintain a sense of humor. Look for the positive in each day.

One approach to coping with stress overload is to take a break from the stressful situation. Here are some suggestions:

- Take a walk.
- Watch a movie.
- Spend time on yourself — take a long bubble bath or shower.
- Listen to music.
- Work in the yard or garden.
- Allow yourself a set amount of time to work on your favorite hobby, or start one.
- Jog, dance, or participate in some other physical activity.

Another approach is to take action to reduce excess muscle tension by using relaxation exercises. Although relaxation exercises do not get at causes of stress overload, they provide a physical release from tension.

Learning to achieve the relaxation response is a skill that takes practice. Practice the technique at least twice a day. Follow these guidelines:

- Find a quiet place.
- Get into a comfortable position — lie down on the floor or sit with uncrossed legs.
- Breathe easily and naturally.
- Keep muscles loose, limp and relaxed.

## Easy Relaxation Techniques

### Deep Breathing

Sit or lie comfortably in a relaxed position. As you slowly breathe in, let your belly expand. Think of it as a balloon filling with air. As you exhale, let the air out of your "balloon" slowly. Place your hands on your stomach. You should feel it rise and lower as you breathe.

### Slower Respiration Rate

Slow down your breathing rate by seeing how few times you can breathe each 60 seconds. When you begin to get tense, take a few minutes and simply slow your breathing down to about three to six breaths per minute.

### Shoulder Exercise

Try to touch your ears with your shoulders. Hold it for a count of 4. Then let your shoulders drop. Now rotate each shoulder separately toward the rear. Do each shoulder 5 to 10 times. Then do both shoulders together.

### Massage

Massage the back of your neck, concentrating on the part that feels tense. Cup your thumbs at the front of your neck and massage on both sides of your spinal column, letting your head fall limply back against your rotating fingers. Use your fingers to massage around your hairline and under your jaws and your cheekbones.

## Mental Vacation

Enjoy the pleasures of a vacation through your imagination. First, close your eyes and think of some place where you would like to be. Then go there in your mind's eye. Perhaps you will go alone, or you might imagine being with someone. You may be quietly watching the sunset, mountain, woods or ocean. You may be active in hiking, hunting shells or rocks, playing some sport or game, climbing a mountain or cycling. Enjoy the experience.

## When To Get Help

Sometimes things may get so difficult and out of control that you may need to get professional help. In most communities, resources such as mental health professionals, support groups, clergy, and medical doctors exist. They can help you deal with extreme levels of stress and the physical and emotional trauma that often accompany them.

The following symptoms indicate a need for outside help:

- You are depressed. (Some signs are: difficulty falling asleep, waking a lot in the night and too early in the morning or sleeping constantly; constant crying for no reason; skipping baths and shampoos; feeling numb, as if you don't want to do anything; fatigue; unreasonable fears; inability to concentrate; change in appetite)
- You hit, shove, kick your spouse (or vice versa).
- You think of suicide.
- You discipline your child too harshly.
- You hear voices or see things.
- You consider separating from your spouse because of problems.
- You feel overwhelmed by bills.
- You can think of nothing good to say about one of your children, or you find yourself constantly down on a family member.
- You drink in the morning. You hide liquor so that no one knows how much you're drinking. You have more than two or three drinks or beers almost every night. You become "mean" while drinking.

- You feel guilty, as though you aren't being a good parent to your children.
- You feel you can't cope. You are "down" on yourself.
- You notice your child is starting to act out a lot, getting in trouble with the law, or acting "crazy."
- You don't know anyone you can talk to, and you feel a strong need to talk to someone.
- You find you're starting to lie to people about what happened to you, or what you're doing. You start lying to yourself.
- You have attacks where you feel extremely panicky, have a high pulse rate and have difficulty breathing.

Before your problems become too big to handle, find a trained, skilled counselor to help you and your family cope with this crisis. A family counselor can help you handle your fears, adjust to your present situation, and plan adequately for the future. Some insurance can help pay for counseling costs. Some counselors charge on a sliding scale—depending on your ability to pay. Your minister or rabbi may provide counseling at no cost to you.

For information on support needed during stress, see EC 1400, *Identifying Sources of Support and Friendship*.

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## For More Information

This publication is one of 13 available in the set, *Managing Between Jobs*, from the Oregon State University Extension Service. The publications provide information to individuals and families facing underemployment and unemployment.

Each title is available without charge. You may order up to six no-charge publications without charge. If you request seven or more no-charge publications, include 25 cents for each publication beyond six. Send order and payment to:

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EC 1402, *Deciding If Teens Should Work*

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