

Managing Between Jobs Helping Children Cope

Lossing a job affects all members of the family. Adults frequently become so preoccupied they forget unemployment has an emotional, as well as financial, impact on their children. Children depend on their parents for emotional security. When parents are tense, upset, and inattentive, much of this security is gone.

Unemployment can mean sudden lifestyle changes for the entire family. There's less money to spend, so decisions must be made on how to spend what's there. It may mean other family members must find jobs. It may mean there is less family time while looking for a job.

Unemployment can mean a parent is home more, which might call for adjusting of schedules and space. It may involve a move.

Whatever change unemployment brings, all family members feel the impact. Discussing these feelings and concerns is important.

Family Communication

Communication has two parts—talking and listening. Each must occur for communication to be successful.

As people undergo changes in their lives, they need to talk about them. This includes adults and children. Harvard psychologist Gerald Kaplan says people who deal with crisis the most successfully are not ashamed to express fears, anxieties, and sorrows, and seek help from others. Children who learn this at a young age will be more likely to cope well with stress as adults.

Being able to express angry feelings helps to keep those feelings from creating more severe problems, such as emotional problems, family violence, or alcohol abuse.

Listening is as important as talking. Everyone needs someone to listen to them—someone who supports them and allows them to openly express feelings. Sometimes a person can find a solution or discover the sources of stress just by talking. The listener should not feel obligated to advise, analyze, or have all the answers. Listening and responding

with concern and understanding may be all the help needed.

Open communication within the family is vital to good relationships. During stress, we frequently need people outside the family willing to listen when we need to vent our feelings. In some families, listening is difficult because we want to help but have strong feelings and opinions. Also, family members are sometimes too busy or preoccupied to listen well. Taking the extra effort to actively listen is important.

Communication Tips

- Be sensitive to “non-verbal” communication. Clenched fists, fidgeting, eye movements, and other “body language” can suggest totally different meanings for what is said.
- “You” statements can stifle communication. Sentences that begin with “you” can sound like accusations.
- Share your feelings with “I” statements. “I” statements build trust in the relationship. They give you ownership for what’s said. The model for this type of communication is:

1. Begin: “I feel _____”
2. Name situation: “when you _____”
3. Tell how you are affected: “because _____”
4. State what you would like to see in the future: “from now on please _____.”

An example might be:

“I feel angry when I get home and find the dishes undone because it makes the place look so messy. Would you please put the dishes in the dishwasher in the future?”

- Give feedback or check your interpretation of what is said. Ask questions such as “Do you mean _____?” “I understood you to say _____.”

Tips for Helping Children Cope

Even though you feel overwhelmed with your own problems, as a parent you can help your children cope with the stress. Here is a list of tips for helping children cope:

- You can help your children best by first helping yourself. Try to gain control of your own stress, then you are ready to help children cope.
- Provide your children with information about your family's situation in a way that is within the child's understanding. Don't keep the job loss a secret from children and other family members, despite the urge to "spare" them or "save face."
- Recognize symptoms of stress that may affect your children. Symptoms may include sleeplessness, diarrhea, withdrawal, headaches, and/or angry outbursts. Encourage the child to share feelings and fears.
- If you feel overwhelmed in helping your children manage stress—talk to the child's teacher, a school psychologist, clergy member, or contact a mental health professional.
- See that children eat balanced diets, and get adequate rest and plenty of exercise to avoid health problems.
- Even though some changes are unavoidable, such as a move, try to keep other major changes to a minimum. Too many changes at once can be overwhelming. Routines are important for children, especially during a crisis.
- Help your children focus on the positive aspects of their lives. Look at family and personal strengths and draw on talents and contributions of all family members. Recognize these contributions, no matter how small.
- Hold a family discussion on how the income loss affects money available for extra activities and allowances. Talk about family spending priorities. Use a worksheet, such as the one

in EC 1391-E, *Setting Spending Priorities*, to discuss how each person will help control family spending.

- Spend family time together doing low-cost or no-cost activities that family members enjoy. Visit nearby museums, hike, bike, camp, or play board games.

If older children can find jobs to supplement family income, decide together how their money will be used. Decide whether it will cover their clothing and recreation expenses or whether they will contribute to food, shelter, and other expenses. See EC 1402-E, *Deciding If Teenagers Should Work*, for more information.

Attitudes and family communication have a great impact on how your family deals with unemployment.

For More Information

This publication is one of several in the *Managing Between Jobs* set available from the OSU Extension Service. Other titles:

- EC 1391-E, *Setting Spending Priorities*
- EC 1392-E, *Strategies for Spending Less*
- EC 1393-E, *Deciding Which Bills to Pay First*
- EC 1395-E, *Keeping a Roof Overhead*
- EC 1396-E, *Bartering*
- EC 1397-E, *Making the Most of What You Have*
- EC 1398-E, *Accepting Your Feelings*
- EC 1399-E, *Living Better with Stress*
- EC 1400-E, *Identifying Sources of Support and Friendship*
- EC 1401-E, *How You Can Help When Your Mom or Dad Is Unemployed*
- EC 1402-E, *Deciding If Teens Should Work*

You can view these by searching on the topic, series number, title, or keyword from the Extension Publications & Videos website at eesc.oregonstate.edu.

Adapted for use in Oregon from a University of Wisconsin–Extension publication.

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Published February 1992, reprinted August 2004.