

PERSPECTIVES AND GUIDANCE FOR THE UNEMPLOYED AND THEIR SPOUSES

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As an outplacement coach I have witnessed couples that become closer and stronger together during a job loss and unfortunately have seen couples that become alienated from each other during the job loss. The couples that navigate this trial in their life as a team tend to get reemployed quicker because they use their energy together to search for the next job. The couples that become alienated tend to have to use the energy that they could use in the job search to work out the relationship issues.

My message to you is that a job loss is not worth a divorce. I would like you to get a good picture in your mind how you would like to be as a couple after the job search is over and you have accepted the next position. Do you want to breathe a sigh of relief and feel that you were supportive of each other or do you want to have memories of alienation from each other during the search? Will you be more trusting of each other and more respectful?

Take a moment right now and write down separately as a couple what you will look like when you are reemployed. You can re-read this when you hit a spot when you are not sure what your mission as a couple is during this time. The ultimate mission is to be stronger as a couple and just get through. I do not recommend working on lurking issues at this time. If they are still lurking after you are reemployed, work on the issues at that time. Your mission and goal is to work as a team to help your spouse get reemployed. The intensity and anxiety that you are feeling will make you super sensitive and edgy and may cause you to lash out irrationally at each other. I would suggest you use your small group to talk to instead. Your spouse is going through enough turmoil without being maligned by you.

Put some boundaries around the times you will discuss finances and updates on the job search process. I suggest you schedule a once a week meeting to talk through family finances, adjustments that need to be made, etc.

Some common feelings exist for couples that go through a job loss. The stages usually follow the stages of grief. I would recommend that you use the stages as a place to discuss feelings with your spouse.

First: Disbelief, shock, sometimes tears of relief, and sometimes, hysterical laughter. A numbness or distance of emotion from people is common. Wild spending is common at this time. One couple spent \$10,000 on frivolous trips to the mall. Too much TV watching also is common. A client I had gave up TV during his job search because he found it was making him unproductive. Couples often want to change everything at this time- “sell everything and buy a motor home to travel the country”. The best advice here is to keep change to a minimum.

Second: Bargaining. For example: “Maybe if I had worked harder”, “Maybe if my spouse had worked harder”...”Maybe I should have married someone more successful, bought a smaller house, should have saved more money”, etc. “Maybe I will start my own business”, franchises look good at this stage. One of my clients, a corporate attorney, and her husband who had been downsized in telecom seriously considered buying a hotdog stand and selling hotdogs in downtown Denver. Not the best use of their skills! Lots of “what ifs” happen during this time.

Surround yourself with wise people at this time for feedback about what you are thinking. Your small group can be a good source of reality orientation during the bargaining stage.

Third: Anger sets in. This might turn towards each other. A corporate executive and his spouse that worked with us at CareerLab had a solid marriage, but after a six month time period of unemployment began to turn their frustration on each other. He said she was only concerned with his income potential. She began to get really angry that he was not as positive and fun as he used to be. During one of our unemployment support groups we helped this couple to realign their marriage again. We reminded them of who they were to each other and to stay on the same team. We basically gave them back the truth about each other that they all ready knew. During a job loss it is very common to have so much intensity and anxiety that the couple is super sensitive to everything and may misperceive each other's intentions. Being aware that these emotions are common should give the two of you comfort. You are normal. Everyone feels this way during a job search. The two of you need to stay steady and not spiral into being negative about each other.

A group of trusted friends is especially important at this stage in order to give you a place to talk about how you may be feeling. I would suggest you do this in separate groups. I say this because much of what you might need to confess is not something that your spouse needs to hear. You will probably never feel this anger at your spouse after they are reemployed. The group will pray with you and help you to hear the truth without judging you. Everyone has been there and felt the intensity of the emotions. There is no condemnation.

Fourth: Reorganization and acceptance settles in. You are set on the goals, on the search for the next opportunity. People in this stage often turn their pain into helping others to achieve their next opportunity. You might be helping others to get in a small group or giving leads, or mentoring someone in what you have learned so far, or taking a couple that is struggling through the job search process and helping them to stay steady in their marriage.

Lastly, some simple guidelines in organizing how to structure your time. Plan a weekly meeting where you and your spouse discuss the state of affairs, report on the job search leads, meetings, networks, make a plan for the week for what you both will be working on to work your networks. Also, weekly discuss the state of the finances. I call this the business meeting to discuss what changes need to be made, bills that need to be addressed etc. Two reasons for scheduling these meetings. By talking about it in a set time both of you will know that you will have your time to ask questions, address concerns. As a couple you need to function as you normally do and not obsessively be quizzing your spouse about finances, job search strategies etc. Again this keeps the energy on the search not on calming fears and anxieties about the search all day long. With one couple I worked with, every time the spouse saw her husband come out of his office or got off the phone she wanted a report of progress. This was draining the energy out of her spouse because he had to calm his wife down several times a day. She also wanted to recalculate their budget over and over during the day. The weekly meetings are a better use of time and energy.

Make sure your spouse has a good handle on how to explain what you do so that you are using both networks effectively. Give your spouse a couple of laymen's terms and the exact job titles and industries and even the target companies that you are searching in. You would be surprised at how many people find their next lead from their spouse's network.

Remember the job search won't last forever; you will be reemployed. Stay on the same team with your spouse. Gain support from your small group; pray with and for each other. Focus with

the end in mind. Come out of this with a strong marriage that has weathered a tough season and can testify to others about what the Lord has done.

You can contact Kathy at carnahan@careerlab.com. For more information on this subject, check out www.careerlab.com or see her interview on The CBS Early Show at <http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2002/07/04/earlyshow/series/main514280.shtml>.