

*Emotional Issues*

# Handling the Trauma Of a Job Search

*Cope with the stress by developing a solid action plan*

BY LESLIE B. PRAGER

David Andrews knew for quite a while that he was going to lose his position as corporate vice president of human resources at an entertainment company. Mr. Andrews (not his real name) thought he was intellectually and emotionally prepared, but it still came as a traumatic shock when D-day arrived. All his feelings were magnified and time seemed to move much more slowly. After eight years with the same employer, the realization that he had no job to go to and no offer in sight suddenly hit home with terrible force.

Few candidates expect unemployment and job hunting to pack such an intense emotional punch. Yet a long search is likely to be filled with many

**Expect to experience feelings of shock, denial, relief, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance**

highs and lows, and can be so draining psychologically as to defeat the most expert job-hunting strategies. To survive this difficult period, you must put the experience in perspective, says Alan Pickman, a psychologist and senior outplacement consultant at Chemical Bank in New York City. The key is understanding what to expect during a search and developing a plan to cope with these issues.

## Dealing With Stress

Several factors helped Mr. Anderson through his "emotionally charged" search. Taking a month off at first to collect his thoughts and putter around the house helped him relax. Meanwhile, his supportive wife helped keep him going, and outplacement provided assistance with resume-writing, self-marketing, setting career goals, job-search planning, networking and interview preparation. After nine

*Ms. Prager is founding partner of the Prager-Bernstein Group, a New York City career counseling and outplacement firm.*

months, Mr. Anderson's efforts paid off. He had three good offers to choose from, one of which he accepted.

Almost every candidate experiences the same stages after a job loss: shock, denial, relief, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance. These phases are comparable to the reactions people have to other life traumas, such as divorce or the death of a loved one. The intensity of reaction tends to correspond with how strongly you identify with your job or profession and how much your lifestyle is likely to be affected by the loss of income.

It's normal also for job seekers to experience tremendous stress, since change is inherently stressful. "A job loss is a way of triggering excess stress and people will react to it," says Judith Evans, a psychologist at Right Associates, a Philadelphia-based outplacement firm.

Learning to recognize, cope with and eliminate stress is essential to your emotional well-being and your search's success. Physical symptoms of excess stress include tension headaches, frequent frowning, teeth-gritting or grinding, muscle tenseness, heartburn, stomach cramps, a rapid resting heartbeat and increased perspiration. Mental symptoms include anxiety, worry, guilt, nervousness, increased anger or frustration, moodiness, depression, increased or decreased appetite, problems concentrating, difficulty making decisions and a sense of being overwhelmed by problems. Behavioral symptoms include an inattention to dress or grooming, nervous habits such as finger or foot tapping, increased irritability, overreaction to small things, social withdrawal, sleep problems, unusual weight gain or loss and increased smoking or alcohol use.

The best way to get rid of harmful stress is to set priorities, improve your diet, exercise, keep busy and socially active and learn to relax. Fortunately, most job-search stress will disappear naturally as soon as you land a new position. Gone too will be your fear of the unknown and your loss of identity, says Ms. Evans. In the meantime, just creating a practical search plan can relieve some anxiety.

## Develop a Plan

Even the best, most successful executives may have little or no experience job-hunting. "Effective job search skills and the ability to define oneself" are critical to a successful search, says Barry Lustig, a career development specialist with the Federation

Employment and Guidance Service in New York City.

However, rather than worry about whether you have the necessary skills, be aware that help is available. There are books, people and other resources that can help you prepare a resume, learn to network and hone your interview skills.

## Ten Steps

You're bound to experience some rocky times during your search, but taking the following steps will help you stay sane and focused:

1. Consider career counseling. If you're unsure about which career direction to take or how to get started in your search, professional career counseling can be invaluable. Compare costs and speak to previous counselees before signing on.

2. Join a support group. Many job hunters' groups provide moral support and practical guidance in a nonthreatening setting. And the costs typically are very low.

3. Lean on your spouse, family and friends. Share your feelings, hopes and fears. Also ask for job-search advice. A human resources administrator who lost her position at a financial services company after nine years says friends, neighbors and support-group members kept her going during her

**Job hunting 40 hours per week can be draining, so take a day off occasionally for something you enjoy**

search by providing moral support, leads and ideas. After eight months, she eventually landed a human resources job with a federal agency.

4. Stay focused and organized. Maintaining a structure is critical to maintaining your search's momentum. Set up a work space and keep a daily log, recording such activities as the number of phone calls made, new contacts connected with, resumes mailed, professional meetings attended and interviews scheduled.

5. Reward yourself. Don't be too hard on your-

*Continued*

self. Job hunting 40 hours per week can be draining, so take a day off occasionally for something you enjoy, such as taking a long walk, going to a movie or visiting a museum. If you can't afford a whole day off, call a friend to chat after every 10 networking calls you complete.

A human resources professional who relocated to New York with her husband faced a tough search because she had few contacts there and no knowledge of the local job market. She soon found that job hunting every day was too tiring and discouraging. To maintain a positive attitude throughout her four-month search, she took off every Friday for such "fun things" as sightseeing.

6. **Make contingency plans.** Until you find another suitable position, you might take a temporary job, return to school or perform volunteer work.

7. **Simplify your search.** Once you've assessed your skills and researched your targets, jump into the market. It may take many months to find a new job, so don't panic or waste time worrying. Whatever you do, don't let yourself become isolated. "Inactivity feeds depression, so do something to get out of your house every day and connect with other people," says Mr. Lustig.

8. **Help others.** "Even when you're down, if you

can do something for another person it helps your self-esteem," says Ms. Evans.

9. **Evaluate your goals.** Examine your life and assess your past successes and limitations, suggests Ms. Evans. What makes you feel nurtured? Spending time with family? Playing sports? Painting pictures? Once you truly understand your strengths and needs, you can build on them and boost your confidence.

10. **Don't take minor rejections seriously.** Job seekers often feel an exaggerated sense of time because search is their central activity, says Mr. Pickman. Someone who's busy at work may not return a call for several days or at all, but you shouldn't take it personally. When slumps hit, don't lose hope. Instead, concentrate on some other productive activity, such as generating more leads or conducting library research on other fields or companies.

Remember that whenever one door closes, another opens. Try to look at this time in your life as an adventure filled with new opportunities. New horizons will open. New possibilities lie ahead in another company, industry or career. You may even realize a lifelong dream of starting your own business. "It's exciting and scary but you'll definitely survive.