

How to Deal With Job-Search Depression

So much of who you are is wrapped up in work, but you are more than your job.

Credit: Magdiel Lopez

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Looking for a new job but having zero luck getting hired can be, to put it lightly, incredibly demoralizing.

As it turns out, “the data supports the conventional wisdom,” said Dan Witters, a principal and research director at the Gallup National Health and Well-Being Index.

While research shows that people experience [an increased sense of well-being just after losing their jobs](#), that trend reverses if they’re still hunting after 10 to 12 weeks. On top of the obvious financial stress that comes with being unemployed or underemployed, these groups also [suffer from worse physical health](#), with rates of depression [rising among the unemployed the longer they go without finding work](#).

The solution to job-search depression isn’t as easy as hitting the pavement and sending out more résumés. Even strong candidates aren’t guaranteed success, creating “this constant uncertainty of not knowing when the job search will end,” said Michelle Maidenberg, an adjunct graduate professor of cognitive behavioral therapy and human behavior at the Silver School of Social Work at N.Y.U. with a private practice in Harrison, N.Y.

Dealing emotionally with this sort of adversity is a skill few of us have been taught, and it requires building new habits in our personal lives.

If it feels as if your well-being is on hold while you focus on bigger things — like a job hunt — consider this: The emotional and mental health outcomes of unemployment can create “a feedback mechanism where the longer you go, the harder it is on your emotional health,” Mr. Witters said. “The worse your emotional health is, the harder it is to find a job.”

Whether you’re suffering from job-search depression or happily employed, learning the coping mechanisms needed to deal with things like uncertainty and loss of control will always come in handy, Dr. Maidenberg said.

You are more than your career

“So much of who we are is wrapped up in work, but you are more than your job,” said Alison Doyle, a job search expert at the Balance Careers, part of the Balance family of sites, which offer advice on such topics as personal finance, careers and small business.

When people imagine job-search depression, they often attribute it to financial instability and frequent rejection, but it turns out that “identity is a much bigger piece of the puzzle than

people had previously thought,” said Dawn R. Norris, an associate professor of sociology at the University of Wisconsin-La Crosse and the author of “Job Loss, Identity, and Mental Health.”

“In fact, many of the people in my study said it was the most important thing to them, even beyond financial problems,” she said. Those who listed financial concerns as their top source of stress often cited a perceived loss of identity as a close second.

The perception that we *are* our work is a major reason the job search, and receiving constant messages that we aren’t who we think we are, is so distressing.

“If your identity is threatened, you need an identity-based solution,” Dr. Norris said.

The solution: Recognize that your personality is made up of a diverse range of experiences, interests and values — not just your employment status — and “have other areas in your life that you can lean on as a source of joy and confidence.” This is pivotal to coping with job loss, Dr. Maidenberg said.

Treat job hunting like a job

Besides the loss of income and identity that can come with being out of work, there’s also the loss of day-to-day structure. Sending out emails while wearing sweatpants on the sofa might seem like a fantasy to some, but after a while, the loss of scheduled time can lead to feelings of anxiety, depression and disconnection, Dr. Norris said.

The solution: Create structure for yourself, both inside the job hunt and out. Setting strict office hours can help keep the search from bleeding into every area of your life, with deadlines pushing you to work more efficiently. Simple rules, like a “No LinkedIn after 6 p.m.” policy, or a mandatory lunch hour, will give you the space to focus on other interests and relationships and mentally recharge.

The stress of a job search can also make people feel as if they don’t deserve down time, but working overtime and pushing to the point of burnout will only exacerbate feelings of isolation and negativity. This can have an impact on both your mental health and your job prospects, Mr. Witters said.

“It’s a feedback mechanism where the longer you go, the harder it is on your emotional health,” he said. “The worse your emotional health is, the harder” it can be to successfully chase down job leads and dazzle interviewers.

Set yourself up for some wins

Mr. Witters said [research showed](#) that setting and reaching goals had a strong inverse relationship to depression.

“If you’re out of a job, one of your goals is going to be to find one,” he said. “That is a goal that is going unrealized.”

The solution: Whether you plan to send out a certain number of cover letters, or accomplish something that’s totally unrelated to your job search, try to “do a few things outside your

comfort zone that are still achievable,” Ms. Doyle said. Doing so, she added, can make you “feel much better about yourself.”

Avoiding the temptation to set overambitious goals is especially important, she said, since failing to accomplish them will negatively affect your well-being and can even slow your overall progress.

While it might feel hard to [appreciate smaller successes](#), especially if they seem mundane or aren’t directly connected to the job hunt, the power of small wins means these moments can have a major impact on our mental and emotional health.

Learn new skills

The stress of the job hunt can make it easy to miss out on a benefit of unemployment: more free time.

The solution: “Look at the time in a way as a gift,” said Ms. Doyle, who recommended volunteering or taking free online classes.

Though using your free time to pursue new hobbies and skills “tends to bite the dust when you’re focused on finding a job,” Mr. Witters said, “there is a good inverse corollary to depression and learning new and interesting things.”

This can also be an opportunity to explore hobbies that you were too busy to nurture and probably won’t have time for once you land a job, Dr. Maidenberg said. Trying out new things and discovering other talents and interests can help us strengthen our identities and enjoy new sources of fulfillment.

If you’re interested in pursuing activities that relate to your professional skills, keeping your résumé up-to-date isn’t the only benefit, Dr. Norris said. “Depending on what aspect of your identity is threatened, finding something to do that’s similar enough” — a former manager could coach children’s sports, for instance; a laid-off E.M.T. might take a public safety course — can help reinforce the feeling that you are still the same person you were before, she said.

Stay social

One of the best ways to take a mental break from the job search, and to reaffirm the parts of your identity that don’t have anything to do with your career, is to spend time with family and friends, Dr. Maidenberg said. It’s also a good way to combat the isolation that many job seekers face.

Putting yourself out there isn’t always easy, especially given that there’s “definitely a stigma” around unemployment, Dr. Maidenberg said. Research shows that [the long-term unemployed spend less time with family and friends](#), and embarrassment can contribute to people avoiding social interactions, Mr. Witters said.

If you’re finding it hard to socialize, start small, Dr. Norris said. Online communities and support groups are good places to start, as are clubs and networking events in your area. Just asking a friend to join you for coffee can help.

If you're having a hard time prioritizing your health during your job search, go one step further and ask a loved one to act as your accountability partner, Mr. Witters suggested.

"Having someone who's encouraging you to pursue a healthy lifestyle and to be a better version of yourself," he said, "helps alleviate the sense of loneliness and isolation and pessimism and despair that can come from prolonged unemployment."

And if people ask what you do for a living?

"It's fine to say, 'I'm looking for my next opportunity,'" Ms. Doyle said. "The average person changes jobs [nearly 12 times in their career](#), and not all of those changes are voluntary." She added that "almost everyone's lost a job, and people love to help people."

Most importantly, she said: "Don't feel bad that you're unemployed, even if it's your fault. It can happen to the best of us. You are not alone."

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