**Coping with Retrenchment Stress**

Retrenchment is a devastating life event. It causes much distress and worry for people affected.

Understanding why retrenchment happens, how it will affect you and learning effective coping strategies, can help you overcome the effects of retrenchment more easily.

Get help on this website to cope with your retrenchment.

Once you realise that retrenchment was a survival strategy for the company, you will also be able to intellectually come to grips with the retrenchment.

**How does retrenchment affect you?**

Retrenchment causes loss in many areas of your life and can be seen as a bereavement. The following areas can be affected:

* Your sense of being *financially safe* (“How will I pay my bills?”, “How will I feed my family?”, “They will take back my car.”)
* Your sense of feeling *personally safe* (“Where will I find a job again?”, “What must I do now?”, “How will my family survive?”)
* Your *identity at home and with friends* (“My wife and kids will no longer look up to me,” or “What will my friends say?”, or “My wife will leave me, because I cannot provide for her.”)
* Your *self-confidence* (“Was I not good enough?”, or “Is it my fault?” or “What will people think of me?”)
* Your *work identity* (“I was such a good salesperson, now I do not know where I belong or what I am going to do”, “How is this going to affect my future career?”)

Grief experts such as Elisabeth Kubler-Ross identified stages of loss. These can be:

* *Shock, disbelief and denial*. “This cannot be happening,” “They must have made a mistake.” “”This cannot be true.” “Why me?”
* *Anger***:** “I am so angry with them, after all I have done for them.” “They destroyed me and my life and I am so cross with them,” “This company is useless, I will show them.”
* *Guilt and bargaining:* “Maybe I should not have been so arrogant with my boss.” “If only I tried harder.” “My poor wife and kids.” “I will go back and ask them if I cannot be re-employed and put on a training course.” “Perhaps I should talk to Mr X in the company to see if he cannot pull strings for me.” “I will sacrifice a part of my salary to return to work.”
* *Depression*: “I feel so down and lately I have not been interested in anything.” “Things will never be the same again-I lost all hope.”
* *Acceptance and hope: “I guess this must have happened to open new doors for me.” Ï am going to look for a job.” Ï have a few ideas on what to do next.”*

These stages of grief need not follow each other, but you can skip some of them or you may even go back and forth between them.

Your stress response will show up in:

* *Your thoughts:* You might doubt the intentions of the management of your work-place worry continuously about the loss of income, become forgetful, lack concentration and start thinking the worst things possible will happen due to the retrenchment.
* *Your feelings:* Your retrenchment could also make you feel embarrassed, angry, down, lonely, uptight, frustrated, irritated, helpless and hopeless. You could feel like crying more often and also get frequent nightmares.
* *Your behaviour:* Increased smoking, drinking or drug taking; eating and sleeping more than usual or less than usual, or having problems with your relationships with other people
* *Your body and health:* A racing heart, sweaty hand palms, tightness in the chest, tightness in your muscles, frequent headaches, upset stomach, breathing difficulties, dizziness, skin problems, being tired all the time, not being able to sleep and a lack of energy

The most important is that you recognise all these signs when they occur and make a mental note that it is normal for a person to have these thoughts and feelings and that it is a phase through which you are going. The most important is not to over-react to the stress.

**Tips for coping with stress**

There are many strategies that you can use to cope with the stress in a healthy manner. Here are some tips.

* **Involve other retrenchees**

The moment you hear that retrenchments are imminent and that you will be involved, you should contact your shop steward or the representative of your Union. Urge them to form discussion groups of five to ten retrenchees like yourself at the work-place so that you can discuss topics that will help you cope. Choose a leader for the group and decide on topics for discussion. These could be:

* How the group members feel about the retrenchment;
* What do I do from here?
* How to tell important others about the retrenchment;
* Options for the future (further training and job-hunting);
* The possibility of starting a joint business venture;
* Where to access help;
* And many more.

You could invite non-governmental organizations, priests, welfare workers, private psychologists, and Career Counsellors of the Department of Labour to deal with some of the topics.

* ***Religion and cultural practices***

Clergy and places of worship can be a great source of comfort to you. The counselling is free of charge and almost always available. They not only know of many sources of assistance, but perhaps can also provide you with voluntary work that could occupy you constructively. Culturally you might have occasional meetings – inform your people and discuss with them how to best deal with your problem.

* ***Inform your family members***

Do not be like the man who got up every morning got dressed and went to “work” after his retrenchment. Your family and friends will not appreciate you for hiding your retrenchment. You can call a family meeting and discuss your feelings about the retrenchment. Tell your family members why the retrenchment happened and that it was not your fault. Discuss the adjustments all of you will have to make. All family members will have to know that they will have to spend less, that everybody will go through a difficult time and that everybody will have to be supportive of the others. Make sure that everyone in the family knows that he or she will experience some feelings of insecurity, anger, resentment, frustration, anxiety and irritation and even a loss of self-respect. These feelings could easily be taken out on each other. Family members should build each other’s self-confidence by stressing their good points. Do things together that will take the stress off all the family members,

* ***Inform friends***

People want to help and be informed about what has an effect on them. Tell your friends that you need their friendship, patience and understanding and some time to accept the whole situation. Try to be positive although it might be difficult right now. Friends can have lots of ideas and sometimes contacts too, that might help you in getting on with your life.

* ***Positive thoughts***

It is important that you keep your thoughts healthy. Concentrate on your own strong points and take note of your achievements. Keep believing in yourself. Concentrate on turning negative thoughts into positive ones, for example “I will never get over this” becomes, “I have enough strength to overcome this.” “This company stole everything from me and I will show them” becomes “The company had no choice. I am going to see the retrenchment as an opportunity for growth for me.” Can you see the difference in reacting with your brain instead of reacting out of your feelings?

* ***Turn the negative into something good***

Try and see the upside of retrenchment. Maybe it is time to move on. Perhaps you can get an even better job than before. This might be the opportunity where you look to improve your current skills and make them relevant in today’s job market. If you are highly skilled or have a professional or trade skill, you can consider teaching part-time at a local college. There are also entrepreneurship options. The most important is to get active and do something about your future career-this will help to redirect your stress into positive channels!

* ***Plan***

Make lists of the things you have to do for every day. Include job-hunting and your specific plans how to go about it on the list. You can also visit this site for job-hunting hints. Then tackle the tasks one at a time. Do the most important tasks first. The lists will help you feel that you have control over your situation and will focus your job-hunting.

* ***Be active***

See to it that you keep up your interests that you used to do. They will take your attention away from your problems and improve your mood. They will also help you keep up the routine and give you a feeling of safety. Go to your club meeting, listen to the radio, watch television, read newspapers and books, play your music instrument, sing, dance, work on crafts, chop wood, clean the land, fix the house, tend to animals, play games like you always used to. Keep busy! This will draw your attention away from your problems and might just help to get you a new job!

* **Community** **Volunteering**

Volunteering your services to people or animals which are in less fortunate circumstances than yourself, can do much to make you feel worthy again. What is more, you can get valuable work experience to help explain away periods in your CV when you have not worked. You can also build up valuable skills and relationships that can assist you to find another job.

* **Contact with previous co-workers**

Try to keep contact with your old co-workers. They can be a source of support and friendship that you dearly need now. In most cases these people will sympathise with your loss. They can keep you informed and direct you towards opportunities if and when they arise. They might, however, also be secretly relieved to still have their jobs and may feel guilty about it. They might even go as far as trying to avoid you, because they do not know how to deal with the situation. While you may feel bitter towards them, acknowledge that they have themselves and their families to look after.

* ***Personal appearance***

See to it that you keep your personal appearance neat and tidy like you used to when you were still working. Nothing will give you such a mood lift as feeling good about your looks. Besides, you never know when you will by chance meet someone who can change your future.

* ***Exercise***

Exercise works against stress – when you are tired, you cannot be stressed. Also exercise helps your brain to secrete dopamine to help you feel good and cope with stress and depression. See to it that you exercise at least three times a week for forty to sixty minutes. Choose activities that are free of charge, such as walking, playing soccer or doing garden work.

* ***Diet***

Food is the fuel of your body. If you do not eat properly, you will feel tired and not able to cope. See to it that you eat regularly and include meat dishes, plenty of vegetables and fruit, starches, dairy products like milk and cheese and a little fat in your diet. Drink at least eight glasses of water per day.

* ***Cut down on stimulants***

It is no use trying to alleviate stress by means of alcohol, cigarettes, drugs and too much coffee and tea. Try to cut down on these. Your body has to work hard to eliminate them and it leaves you with less energy to cope with your problems. Stimulants might also make you more stressed!

* ***Rest and sleep***

See to it that you get enough sleep. An adult needs about six to eight hours sleep to function properly during daytime. You will most probably also find that you need time to be by yourself and think about what has happened. Do this when necessary, but see to it that it does not take up all your time.

* ***Relax***

You can always find time to unwind. Lie down wherever you feel safe. Make yourself as comfortable as possible and let your mind wonder to a place where you have always felt calm and safe. It could be the place where you grew up, a veld, a forest, a riverside or the sea. Try to think about, or daydream, what you see there, what you can hear, what you smell and feel. If you use the example of the veld, you can think of the green trees and bushes, the mildness of the sun on your back and head, the wind blowing through your clothes, the white clouds sailing above, the fresh smell of the air, the birds singing in the trees, the little brown animals crawling on the rocks. Do this for at least fifteen minutes or as long as you feel comfortable with. In this way you will be able to give your thoughts a vacation. Listening to good music that you enjoy and keeping your sense of humor will also help you to relax.

* ***Pamper yourself***

You will find that giving treats to yourself will make your days happier and you will feel important. This is very important for helping you cope with stress. The treats need not cost money. Have a hot bath. Go on a picnic. Draw or colour in a picture. Prepare a special meal. Take a nap. Walk in the veld. Do whatever you regard as special. Focus on the pleasant activities you do to see its shapes, colours, tastes, sounds and feel. ,

* ***Breathing***

Inhaling deeply, holding your breath for about five counts and then exhaling slowly can help much to alleviate stress, especially if you tell yourself, “Relax and let go” when you are exhaling. Do this a few times until you feel calmer.

* ***Accept the reality***

The main aim of coping with retrenchment is accepting the situation. Put the past behind you. Nothing will change what has happened to you. It is what you are going to do about it that will count. Remember, life is about changes. Living your life is coping with the changes.

**Further help:**

Also see the other web pages on retrenchment that can help you. How to Manage your Money Matters for example provides important advice on dealing with finances in this rough time. If you feel that the above tips do not help you, it is time to see a professional. Contact one of the Career Counsellors at the Department of Labour. They will help you work through the retrenchment or refer you to another professional. They will treat your problem with confidentiality. Go to [www.labour.gov.za](http://www.labour.gov.za) for contact details of your nearest Labour Centre.

There are a number of organizations in the community that can provide emotional and financial counseling to you regarding retrenchment, such as Lifeline ([www.lifeline.org.za](http://www.lifeline.org.za), tel. 011-728 1331) and the Family and Marriage Counselling Society of South Africa (FAMSA), [www.famsa.org.za](http://www.famsa.org.za), tel. 011-788 4784. Both these organizations have offices countrywide.