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# Unemployment, Mental Health and Substance Use

Unemployment rates continue to yo-yo up and down, but they never disappear altogether. At any given time, tens of thousands of people in BC are without work. But even though unemployment is an ongoing issue in our society, the shame associated with job loss and the tendency for people to blame themselves for their unemployment continue to increase the population's vulnerability to mental health and substance use problems.

In terms of major life upheavals, the stress of unemployment ranks alongside that of a serious injury, going through a divorce or mourning the loss of a loved one. In fact, workers can actually go through grief reactions similar to bereavement, particularly if they have been unemployed a long time, have dependents, or had little notice of the job loss. Like other losses, the most common reactions to job loss include shock, anger, frustration and denial. Over time, unemployed workers may begin to question their abilities, their friendships, their purpose in life and even their self-worth.

It isn't just self-blame that's the problem either. International research confirms that people in the community often blame the unemployed, insist that they could find a job if they tried harder and maintain that too little is demanded from recipients of unemployment benefits. This prejudice is strongest from youth, those self-employed or in working-class positions, and those who have not been themselves (or had a loved one) recently unemployed.

Some people eventually adjust to unemployment, others find new sources of income, and a handful work towards social change to address the roots of unemployment. They focus their energies on changing external factors such as government economic policies, the rapid pace of technological change or a corporate decision to relocate a plant in a region with lower wage standards.

Nevertheless, most Canadians will respond to job loss with blame. Research by UBC finds that among people who have been laid off, blame usually finds a place either externally or internally. Those who feel they are treated unfairly blame an organization and have strong feelings of anger. Those who feel the process is reasonably fair and respectful will blame themselves and face high levels of guilt. Self-blame and guilt can foster feelings of depression. Unfortunately, the worse the depression, the less likely the person is to find adequate employment and, so, the stronger the depression can become. Substances can also complicate the picture. Layoff, particularly in older workers, has been seen

to trigger relapse in former smokers and lead non-drinkers to turn to alcohol. These negative effects rob power from people at a time they need it most.

Jane, a 30-year-old biologist, says her nine-month period of unemployment triggered suicidal thoughts and put her in "a state of almost physical inertia."

"My economic situation definitely played a role and made me more vulnerable to depression," she recalls. Jane received treatment for her illness and eventually found work as a biology consultant. She says much of her recovery came after "going from a period of serious financial problems and having to worry about money all the time, to just being poor and knowing I can at least pay my bills."

A person doesn't have to have lost all employment to see these mental health consequences. Re-employment can reverse symptoms of depression, but not all re-employment is created equal. One long-term study of unemployed workers found that individuals moving into less satisfactory jobs reported no mental health benefits.

Another study found that the transition from adequate employment to underemployment, that is, forced part-time or low-wage jobs, resulted in lower self-esteem and greater alcohol abuse. Even the *threat* of job loss has been

## Coping with Unemployment

- create a daily schedule including regular time for job search activities, exercise and social activities
- if you are eligible for unemployment or welfare benefits, claim them as soon as you possibly can
- recognize that most people are not at fault for losing their jobs
- if you decide you really were responsible for losing your job, improve your skills or attitude from books at the library or courses offered through a Service Canada Centre
- find out about low-cost entertainment, recreation, food and clothing in your community to reduce expenses
- reach out to family and friends for support
- consider joining a self-help group to share your feelings and learn new skills
- tell everyone you know exactly what kind of work you are looking for: remember, many people get their jobs through "word of mouth"
- keep busy and stay active outside your home: isolating yourself will not get you a job and can lead to additional mental and emotional stress
- reward yourself for your efforts

## More than a Job is Lost...

Other losses may include:

- daily structures that provide a sense of coherence
- camaraderie at work
- income and access to opportunities offered through the workplace (e.g. networking with colleagues, promotions, transfers, etc.)
- self-worth and sense of purpose
- peace of mind and feeling of security
- social status, identity, status within the family

shown to have negative effects on physical health and mental health—alarming, these effects are not completely reversed by removal of the threat and they tend to increase when workers feel job insecurity over a long period of time.

Unemployment doesn't cause mental disorders but it can amplify the symptoms of pre-existing illnesses or trigger mental health problems for someone already vulnerable. Unemployment can also put people at greater risk of experiencing problems with substance use. Social isolation combined with extra free time and fewer or no job responsibilities may increase someone's vulnerability to problem substance use through a need to fill a gap in their life, or even to pass the time.

It may also increase the risk of a person acting on thoughts of suicide. Evidence from a study of suicide rates in Denmark suggests that unemployment is a significant risk factor for suicide for both men and women. For men, the risk increases with the degree of unemployment. Low income is also a significant risk factor for suicide. High unemployment rates have also been linked to increased rates of domestic violence, sexual assault, homicide, property crimes, and racial tensions.

Although unemployment affects people of all ages and socio-economic backgrounds, it hits those hardest who are already the most vulnerable in society including single-parent families, people with disabilities, visible minorities and immigrant families. Studies also show that in small communities with a history of low employment, individuals are less likely to suffer discrimination, and more likely to find community supports to help them through a period of unemployment. In larger cities with a greater range of socio-economic circumstances, an unemployed person is more likely to feel shame and less likely to access either formal or informal community supports.

People with mental illness are especially vulnerable. Unemployment rates for people with psychiatric disorders hover around three to five times higher than rates among people with no disorders. People with mental illness face additional barriers to employment since these disorders often strike in early adulthood

at a time when education and job skills are being developed. Nevertheless, the ability to participate in the workforce is the single most important factor in making a successful transition to the community at large.

Maurizio Baldini, 44, says returning to the workforce is possible with access to the right encouragement and support. A former lawyer with schizophrenia, Baldini was unemployed for a year following his last period in hospital more than a decade ago. He says his strong work ethic drove him to find a job at a clubhouse providing support to people with mental illnesses. "I got minimum wage, so it was quite a letdown economically compared to working as a lawyer. But it did give me a boost to work," he recalls.

Baldini adds that the ability to work helped him regain his independence and sense of purpose in his life. Now employed as a mental health advocate, Baldini points to the need for flexibility and affirmative action in the workplace. "I think many people with mental illness, given some type of opportunity, could really benefit from employment," he says.

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