

Staying “up” in a downturn

Thousands of people are losing their jobs as a result of the current financial downturn. The vast majority of them will be facing one of the biggest personal crises of their lives. It is an awful position to be in and very scary. For many of them, the first thing that goes is their self-confidence, fuelled by fear and anxiety. Some people define themselves by what they do: lose your job and you lose your very identity. It is a huge issue. As a coach, helping people re-gain their confidence is an important step towards starting over. It often starts by re-defining oneself as a casualty of circumstances, rather than as a victim. You are not alone. This is not about you. This won't last forever. It is essential to try to maintain a positive outlook.

But it is not easy, as I have discovered for myself. Some time ago I was made redundant for financial reasons, but I took it very personally. My self-esteem fell through the floor and my self-confidence quickly followed. For the first few weeks I was immobilised by fear and panic. I convinced myself that I would never get another decent job. I was not good enough. I had really screwed up. I was a failure.

Then about a month later I had lunch with a friend who was an employment lawyer. After the commiserations she asked me what I was going to do. I told her that I was going to look for exactly the same sort of job that I had just lost. After all, that was all I was good at. That's all I knew.

I might as well have told her I was going off to join the circus, so dumbfounded was the look on her face. “You must be joking!”, she cried. “You weren't happy in that job. It's no wonder you were let go! Why on earth would you want to go right back into something that made you so miserable?”

“If you think that is all you are good at, then you will be right,” she continued. “You will go back to a job for which you are most certainly qualified but which does not suit your personality. Your morale will suffer. All that negative thinking of yours will attract negativity and it will end in exactly the same way—you sitting here thinking you are a failure. It is a self-fulfilling prophecy!”

I was angry and defensive at first, but of course she was right. The job had started out well, but had morphed into something different. I became increasingly unhappy and it must have shown. No matter how I tried to pretend that it was going well and I loved my work, it was destined to come a cropper. As my morale dropped my self-confidence faltered, which affected my ability to do my job well. As my performance suffered, so too did my self-confidence. It was a vicious cycle. Every day that I went in to the office, pretending that I wanted to be there, was like pouring nice clean sand on a toxic dump. Eventually the fumes were going to rise to the surface and explode. It would have inevitably ended in tears – mine! - company finances notwithstanding.

“So here's what you're going to do,” she declared. “You are going to become a consultant. That will give you the freedom to help lots of people, to write, and to enjoy some precious time with your children. You will announce the launch of your consultancy next week at that marketing conference where you will be speaking.”

And that's what I did. I had no letterhead, business cards, business plan, anything. But somewhere deep down inside I must have held on to some resourcefulness and faith in myself. Someone at the conference seemed to have faith in me too, and engaged me as a consultant the following day. I did not make as much money as

when I had been employed, but what I gained in personal fulfilment, self-worth and confidence more than made up for the drop in pay.

It is very hard to feel positive and remain confident in the current climate. Every day the press announces yet another disaster with grim predictions for the future. And there is nothing more infectious than feeling bad. Negativity and pessimism feed on each other, especially when directed inwards at oneself. If you allow negative thoughts about yourself to permeate your consciousness and control your life you are on a downward spiral to that self-fulfilling prophecy. But it works both ways. As Henry Ford said, "*Whether you think you can, or think you can't, you are right!*"

So how do you stay positive, confident and even optimistic when faced with losing your job? Here are a few tips that have worked for me and my clients. Some may suit you, some may not. A few may sound a bit too "new-age-y" for your liking, but I invite you to consider them and I hope they help.

1. Don't see yourself as a victim

You did not cause the current crisis that led to your losing your job, you are not to blame for it. You are a casualty of a situation that has dumped thousands of others in the same boat as you. Yes it is horrible and frightening. Yes it is unfair. Yes, you are entitled to be angry. Don't deny these feelings, but don't let them get the better of you. Treating yourself as a victim starts the spiral of negativity that I mentioned above. Don't go there! Talk to others in the same position as you. Gain solace, no matter how fragile, from the fact that you are not alone! A problem shared often helps you gain clarity and insight.

2. Try to see this as an opportunity

This will not come easily, nor will it happen immediately. You need time to digest the bad news and get some perspective. After you have dealt with the initial shock, look at what you have done up to now with your career and why. Is it something that really makes you happy? If you can afford to change direction then now is the time seriously to consider doing so. If you can't afford a change now, but want to change eventually, then this may be just the impetus you need to develop a long-term plan which will allow you, in time, to move towards that which you really want to do. Just knowing that you have a plan B, no matter how long it takes to achieve, can help you to stay focused and positive. So use this time to really think about your next step.

3. Don't worry about things that you cannot change

My three great aunts died, respectively, at 105, 104 and 101. When they each reached 100, I asked them what they considered to be the key to their longevity. They each answered that, many years previously, they stopped worrying about things they could not change. One went so far as to stop reading newspapers, or at least avoided reading the bad news! Frankly, I'm with her on that one. As one writer put it, "*Worrying does not empty tomorrow of its troubles. It empties today of its strength.*"

4. Keep a journal or diary

This does not work for everyone, but has certainly helped a number of people with whom I have worked. If you feel uncomfortable talking to someone, write your thoughts down. Studies have shown that the very process of writing can be therapeutic by helping to unscramble and clarify confused and conflicting thoughts. It can be used beneficially to create a sense of order and organization to your plans, goals, and feelings. This is not a learned opinion or essay. No one else is going to read it. Do not censor yourself. Just write whatever comes into your head, no matter how good, bad, dark, absurd, whatever. Writing can help rid your mind of those thoughts that paralyze your ability to move forward.

5. Look after your physical and psychic health

Find time to go to the gym, take a walk, listen to music, go to a movie, make a quilt—whatever it is that nourishes your soul and re-charges your batteries. Only you know what that is. Lean on friends and family and resist the temptation to dull the pain or anxiety with drink or drugs. And get some sleep! Everything looks particularly bleak at 4.00 in the morning. Don't lie there and stew (see point 3 above). Get up, read a book, write in your journal, watch a dumb movie. Do anything that will break the circuit of negative thoughts.

6. Don't let others determine your self-worth

Stop comparing yourself to others in a way that only makes you feel inadequate. There will always be someone smarter, richer, better looking, younger, thinner, or more successful than you. But it does not mean they are any happier. Indeed I know a lot of "successful" people who are plagued by bad health and on anti-depressants! Don't go by what is visible – what people wear, drive, live in, or earn. You never know what others are going through inside. But if you are going to compare yourself or your plight to others, try thinking instead of those who are less fortunate than you. It will help you to maintain a sense of perspective and realise you have a lot for which you can be thankful. And while you are doing that, think about the next point:

7. Give something back. Volunteer.

Norman Vincent Peale, the great guru of the power of positive thinking, said, "*When you become detached mentally from yourself and concentrate on helping other people with their difficulties, you will be able to cope with your own more effectively. Somehow, the act of self-giving is a personal power-releasing factor.*" And he is not alone. Philosophers and thinkers across the ages have recognised how giving of yourself can enrich and empower your life beyond measure. As an ancient Chinese proverb put it, "*When I dig another out of trouble, the hole from which I lift him is the place where I bury my own.*"