

# Long Beach

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### **Coping With Job Loss: Battling Stress, Anxiety And Increased Health Risks**

Professionals Discuss Mental And Physical Effects Of Workforce Reductions



Ellen Goldsmith, a Long Beach therapist and licensed clinical social worker, provides counseling for people who have lost their job and are coping with financial hardships or any other trauma that causes stress and anxiety. Her office is located at 6700 E. Pacific Coast Hwy., Suite 104. (Photograph by the Business Journal's Thomas McConville)

■ By **SEAN BELK**  
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Learning you soon will be without a job can be a shocking experience, especially if it's no fault of your own.

The recession has forced many public and private employers, across the board, to curtail the highest expense for any business and government agency: payroll and benefits.

But joblessness, or even perceived job loss, affects much more than just a person's pocketbook. The stress, anxiety and immediate mental strain associated with losing one's job can cause major health risks, according to recent national studies, local therapists and college professors.

The concern appears to be gaining national attention as high unemployment rates persist in cities still heavily hit by the economic downturn and more people out of work are now losing their health benefits. Recent studies suggest that after more than a year of being laid off, even healthy workers have a much higher chance of shortened life spans and

contracting physiological health problems, such as hypertension or heart disease and diabetes.

Some psychologists in Long Beach, which has a 13.8 percent unemployment rate, have reduced service costs to retain patients who may have lost their healthcare coverage. Others have tailored their practice to address patients in such "life displacements" that can be similar to divorce or losing a family member.

Ellen Goldsmith, a Long Beach therapist and licensed clinical social worker for nearly 30 years, said a person's age, work experience, career investment and education play a large part in how a person responds to a layoff.

Single people without a support network tend to harbor the greatest fear, she said, because there is no one else to go through the ordeal or financial burden with. The stress is also high for sole income earners of a family household who are relied upon for paying bills, housing, food and clothing. Significant others have to be particularly understanding and patient in these situations, Goldsmith added.

People who have been employed for many years have become accustomed to a workday structure, and when that's taken away, the shock of having to change habits and the stresses of financial loss can cause a "free floating sense of fear or dread," leading to high levels of anxiety and depression.

"Anxiety itself actually has huge health risks," she said. "The higher level of unresolved feelings you carry around inside yourself, the more it produces hormones that actually either leads to weight gain or other physical complications."

The hormone process is when there is a large amount of adrenaline produced in the body triggered by an event, which can have either positive or negative outcomes, she added. More adrenalin in the body can lead to a sense of self-confidence but also an undefined sense of dread can be "exhausting and fearful." High anxiety and feeling of "betrayal" by an employer places more stress on every organ in the body, including the heart, and the vessels around the heart, which can raise blood pressure and create problems for those with preexisting cardiac propensity.

Reaching to alcohol or chemical substances to alleviate stress only exacerbates the problem, she added. "Alcohol is, in fact, a depressant and used in combination with other medications can be seriously dangerous for the body."

### **Managing Stress**

Dr. Guido Urizar, a psychology professor at California State University, Long Beach (CSULB), said financial loss is high on the list of major events that can cause long-term chronic levels of stress that can further lead to mental and physical illness. Constantly worrying about finances can have an impact on those still employed as well, with studies showing people taking more sick days.

"There are studies out that show a clearer relationship between chronic levels of stress and our immune functioning," he said. "In other words, those of us that experience chronic levels of stress, regardless of what the events are that trigger it, can make us more susceptible to getting sick, because our immune system doesn't do as well as it should."

Short term or chronic levels of stress activate the nervous system, which is responsible for the natural reaction to certain stressful situations, Urizar said. Modern day stressors, however, can cause a person's nervous system to react in a negative way, even though the situation may not be life threatening. A person's thoughts, whether positive and optimistic or negative, can largely impact how a person feels or responds to a stressful situation.

Exercise, meditation, healthy eating habits and other feel-good actions trigger a relaxation response that quiets the nervous system with the same type of positive results as medications or prescriptions. (Although sometimes the degree varies, with medication being either more, or sometimes less, effective, depending on each situation.) "The good news is that there are also a lot of strategies that can turn that switch off," Urizar said.

Yoga, for instance, is an especially fast-growing trend –

and industry – for reducing stress. A 2009 study by Harvard Mental Health Letter found that, "Yoga appears to blunt the harmful effects of heightened stress by influencing the body's response to stress. This is reflected in slower heart and breathing rates and lower blood pressure, all of which are good for the body. There is also evidence that yoga helps increase heart rate variability, an indicator of the body's flexibility in responding to stress."

In addition to the stress of job loss, looking for a job has its own anxieties. Strategies for creating a strong resume and how to look for a job in this technologically changing world, for example, have changed drastically in the last 20, even 10, years.

Goldsmith said the fact that so many people are unemployed today should actually have a more positive effect on a person's psyche and lessen feelings of failure, in that no one is alone in their situation today. "One of the advantages today is that a lot of people are going through this," she said.

The next step is to move into a realization of what to do to resolve the situation, Goldsmith said, looking at how to get help and support, network, gather personal contacts and create a realistic plan of action to overcome financial hurdles. "Make a commitment to yourself and a significant other about 'this is my plan and this how I'm going about doing it,'" she said.

### **Rising Insecurity**

The layoffs from the recession have caused many individuals and families to lose their health insurance. According to a recent study released by the UCLA Center for Health Policy Research, the total number of uninsured in California now stands at 8.4 million – up from 6.4 million in 2007 – amounting to 24.3 percent of California citizens.

The loss of health benefits increases the feeling of insecurity among those still employed, which appears to be high in the state, according to Goldsmith. "It's really high in California, evidently higher here than anywhere else around the country," she said. "I think the more challenged the economy, the more constantly people hear those messages, the more sense there is a dread of 'maybe I'm next.'"

Christopher Warren, a CSULB professor in occupational-industrial psychology, said imbalances in the workplace, such as pay gaps, favoritism, turnover rates and an employer's insensitivity to a worker's wellbeing combined with harsh economic times, can cause increased anxiousness, emotional factors, envy, depression, poor performance and group hostility.

What's called "terror management theory" or "death salience," where a person is in constant awareness of one's mortality, coined by famed psychologist Ernest Becker, can be triggered by mistreatment or lack of support in the workplace. "I think when funds are limited and there's a competition for those funds, that's when that imbalance happens," he said. "So when there are people losing their jobs, or getting furloughed . . . it really does strike your survival, your abili-

ty to put food on the table and pay your rent. So that's what makes that death salience or mortality salience come out."

In addition, Warren said some companies are taking a holistic approach to looking at employees not as temporary workers but as life-long family members. "I think that's important for organizations to redevelop their mission to recognize the holistic employee because their emotional and physical well being contributes to the organization's success in the long run," he said.

### **Employee Assistance**

Many employers, both private and public, are required by federal law to give a 60-day notice to employees being laid off due to workforce reductions. Under the U.S. Worker Adjustment and Retraining Notification (WARN) Act, employers with 100 or more employees, are required to give most full-time workers prior notice.

The advance notification can give some support to help workers adjust to the job loss. But some employers go above and beyond those requirements, offering Employee Assistance Programs to aid employees during the transition.

Ken Walker, manager of personnel operations for the City of Long Beach, said once the department gets confirmation of a layoff, the city sets up meetings with the affected personnel, identified through the city's civil service department. During the meeting, a variety of city staff are provided to assist the employee, including counselors from the city's health department. The city's workforce development staff then gives a presentation about resume preparation and interview skills, in addition to offering any open positions within the city.

The city pays the employee any accrued vacation and holiday time and offers six months of COBRA healthcare payments. The employees would have to pay for the rest of

the payments extended for 18 months after leaving the city. The city's healthcare assistance program for laid off workers is even more generous than the federal government's previously enacted requirement through the Recovery Act that once required city's pay 65 percent of healthcare payments, he added.

"We do have a method in place where we actually bring the people in and tell them about the benefits that are available to them to help them transition to a new opportunity," Walker said. "What we try to do is provide as many services as possible to help them through that, depending on what their needs are."

On the corporate front, Stephen Davis, a spokesperson for Boeing's global staffing department in Seattle, Washington, said the company, which currently employs about 5,000 workers in Long Beach, first tries to find laid off employees other jobs within the company. "We are hiring in certain critical skill areas," he said. "We do try to retain our talent because we have invested in our employees."

In a layoff briefing, employees are offered opportunities specific to their location, given options of unemployment benefits, if eligible, and other services, such as resume writing for specific professions and connections to employment offices, laid out well in advance so they can make plans, he said.

In addition, employees are offered counseling services and an around-the-clock automated phone service for counseling assistance, company-wide. "The whole message here is that we respect these people and we want them to be able to land on their feet," Davis said. "They may have an opportunity to come back to the company in the future. These are valuable people and we try our best to find another spot for them and we try to help them through the transition as best we can." ■